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THE FLAMES
OLAF STAPLEDON

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Olaf Stapledon

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Introductory Note

AN introductory note seems called for to explain to the reader the origin of the following strange document, which I have received from a friend with a view to publication. The author has given it the form of a letter to myself, and he signs himself with his nickname, "Cass," which is an abbreviation of Cassandra. I have seldom met Cass since we were undergraduates together at Oxford before the war of 1914. Even in those days he was addicted to lurid forebodings, hence his nickname. My last meeting with him was in one of the great London blitzes of 1941, when he reminded me that he had long ago prophesied the end of civilization in world–wide fire. The Battle of London, he affirmed, was the beginning of the long–drawn–out disaster.

Cass will not, I am sure, mind my saying that he always seemed to us a bit crazy: but he certainly had a queer knack of prophesy, and though we thought him sometimes curiously unable to understand the springs of his own behaviour, he had a remarkable gift of insight into the minds of others. This enabled him to help some of us to straighten out our tangles, and I for one owe him a debt of deep gratitude. He saw me heading for a most disastrous love affair, and by magic (no other word seems adequate) he opened my eyes to the folly of it. It is for this reason that I feel bound to carry out his request to publish the following statement. I cannot myself vouch for its truth. Cass knows very well that I am an inveterate sceptic about all his fantastic ideas. It was on this account that he invented my nickname. "Thos," which most of my Oxford friends adopted. "Thos," of course, is an abbreviation for Thomas, and refers to the "doubting Thomas" of the New Testament.

Cass, I feel confident, is sufficiently detached and sane to realize that what is veridical for him may be sheer extravagance for others, who have no direct experience by which to judge his claims. But if I refrain from believing, I also refrain from disbelieving. Too often in

the past I have known his wild prophesies come true.

The head of the following bulky letter bears the address of a well–known mental home.

"THOS."

The Letter

Dear Thos,

My present address is bound to prejudice you against me, but do please reserve judgment until you have read this letter. No doubt most of us in this comfortable prison think we ought to be at large, and most are mistaken. But not all, so for God's sake keep an open mind. I am not concerned for myself. They treat me well here, and I can carry on my research in para–norrnal and super–normal psychology as well here as anywhere, since I am used to being my own guinea–pig. But by accident (yet it was really no accident at all, as you will learn) I have come into momentous knowledge; and if mankind is to be saved from a prodigious and hitherto entirely unforeseen disaster, the facts must somehow be made known.

So I urge you to publish this letter as soon as possible. Of course I realize that its only chance is to be accepted by some publisher as fiction; but I have a hope that, even as fiction, it will take effect. It will be enough if I can rouse those who have sufficient imaginative insight to distinguish between *mere* fiction and stark truth paraded as fiction. My only doubt is as to whether any publisher will accept my story even as fiction. I am no writer; and people are more interested in clever yarns of love or crime than in matters that lie beyond the familiar horizon. As for the literary critics, with a few brilliant exceptions, they seem to be far more concerned to maintain their own reputations as *connoscenti* than to call attention to new ideas.

Well, here goes, anyhow! You remember how in the old days, I suspected that I had certain unusual powers, and you all laughed at me; specially you, Thos, with your passion for intellectual honesty. But though you were always the most sceptical, you were also in a way the most understanding, and sympathetic. *Your* laughter, somehow, didn't ostracize me. Theirs did. Besides, even when you

were in your most perverse and blind mood, you somehow "smelt" right, in spite of your scepticism. You were indeed sceptical, but emotionally you were open– minded and interested.

Recently I have developed those unusual powers quite a lot, and I am studying them scientifically: inspired by you. I should love to tell you all about it, and have your criticism, some day. But at present I am concerned with something far more important; infinitely important, from the human point of view, anyhow.

A couple of months before I was put in this place, I went to the Lakes for a holiday. I had recently done a job in Germany, writing up conditions, and things had got on my nerves; both the physical misery and also certain terrifying psychical reverberations which will sooner or later react on us all. When I returned to England, I was near a breakdown, and I needed that holiday desperately. So I found a farm where I could be comfortable and alone. I intended to do a lot of walking, and in the dark evenings I would read through a bundle of books on the para–normal stuff.

When I arrived, the whole countryside was under snow. Next morning I scrambled up the gill at the head of the valley and set my course for the most interesting of the local mountains. (I won't trouble you with names, you miserable clod–hopper of the valleys!) All went well until the late afternoon, when, as I was coming down from the peak, a blizzard caught me. The wind went through my trousers like water through a sieve, and my legs stiffened with the cold, the hellish cold. I felt the beginnings of cramp. The driving snow shut out everything. The whole world was white, and yet at the same time black, so dark was it. (Why am I telling you all this? Frankly, I don't see *how* it is relevant to my story, and yet I feel strongly that it *is* relevant: and must be reported, if you are to get things in the right proportion.) You remember how painfully sensitive I always was to the temper of a situation, a scene or a crowd of people. Well, this situation upset me horribly. I had to keep telling myself that, after all, I was *not* the last man on earth about to succumb to the ultimate frost. A queer terror seized me, not simply for myself, though I was very doubtful about finding my way down before nightfall, but for the whole human race. Something like this, I told myself, will really happen on the last

man's last day, when the sun is dying, and the whole planet is arctic. And it seemed to me that an icy and malignant presence, that had been waiting in the outer darkness ever since the universe blazed into being, was now closing in on all the frail offspring of that initial divine act of creation. I had felt the same terrifying presence in Germany too, but in a different mood. There, it was the presence not of the outer cold and darkness but of the inner spirit of madness and meanness that is always lying in wait to make nonsense of all our actions. Everything that any of the Allies did in that partitioned and tragic country seemed fated to go awry. And then, the food shortage. The children wizened and pinched; and fighting over our refuse bins! And in England one finds people grumbling about their quite adequate rations, and calmly saying that the fate of Germans doesn't matter.

Thos, we're all human, aren't we, all equally persons? Surely persons ought to be able to feel their fundamental kinship whatever their race. Even if they were of different species, if they were bred in different worlds, surely they ought to accept full responsibility for one another simply in virtue of their personality. But, my God! I see I have said something that will look mighty foolish in relation to what I am going to say later in this letter. I must emphatically disown my own thoughtless remarks. Indeed, as I shall later explain, I am not always able to resist the influence of certain alien powers that are at work in my mind.

But I am straying from the point.

I floundered down the stony snowed–up shoulder of the mountain, and soon I realized that I was completely lost. There was nothing for it but to press on downwards, hoping for a change of weather, and a release from the gripping cramp in my thighs. After an hour or so, a change did come. The snow stopped, the sky lightened. The surrounding mist glowed from the still–hidden sun. Presently the veil was lifted, and I found myself on a familiar ridge between two wide valleys. The view was—well, brilliant, so dazzlingly beautiful that I felt my throat tighten as if I was going to blubber or vomit. Imagine a panorama of blanck mountain shapes, all snow–clad. Those to the east were faintly pink in the level rays of the sun. Those to the west were a strange translucent grey–green, like blocks

of ice cut into the familiar shapes. The cold and malignant presence was seemingly still in possession of the world; but now, having blotted out all life from the universe, it was amusing itself with miracles of beauty.

I came down the ridge at a trot, taking a header now and then in the snow. After a while, a disused mine attracted my attention. By an odd trick of the setting sun, a great heap of stones looked like a smouldering hillock, seen against the background of the dark valley. I could imagine this excrescence as an efflux of glowing lava that had welled out of the mine. The tone of the whole world was now changed. I was thrown back into some remote age, when the solidifying crust of the earth was still fragile, and constantly breaking under the pressure of the turbulent lava beneath. It was almost as though, in descending the mountain, I had also descended the piled aeons of time, from the earth's future icebound death to its fiery youth.

Then I had a strange experience. First, a whim (which now I know to have been no whim at all) impelled me to turn aside from my route, and explore the sunlit rubbish. Reaching it, I climbed its slope. At a certain point I stood still, wondering what to do next. I turned to rejoin the track, but an irresistible impulse brought me back to the same spot. I stooped down, and began lifting the stones away, till I had made a little hollow in the rough slope. I worked steadily on, as though I had a purpose, laughing at my own aimless persistence. As the hollow deepened, I grew excited, as though I were "getting warmer" in my search. But presently the impulse to burrow left me, and after a moment's blankness I began to feel about in the pit, as though I were searching for some familiar object in a cupboard in a dark room. Then contact with one particular little stone gave me a sudden satisfaction. My fingers closed on it, and I straightened my back. It was just an ordinary stone, quite irregular, and about the size of a matchbox. I peered at it in the dusk, but could see nothing remarkable about it. In a moment of exasperation, I flung it away; but no sooner had it left my hand than I was after it in an agony of desire and alarm. Not till I had done some anxious groping, did I have the satisfaction of touching it again. I now began to realize that my behaviour was queer, in fact quite irrational. Why, I asked myself, did I value this particular

stone? Was I merely mad, or did some ulterior power possess me? If so, what did it will of me? Was it benevolent or malignant? I tried an experiment on myself. Putting the stone down carefully where I could easily find it again, I walked away, expecting once more to feel the distress that I had felt on throwing the stone from me. To my surprise, I felt nothing but a very mild anxiety. Of course, I reminded myself, on this occasion there was no real danger of losing the stone. The power, or whatever it was that possessed me, was not to be deceived. I returned to the stone, picked it up almost lovingly, and put it in my pocket. Then I hurried down the slope, guided by a distant light, which I guessed to be the farm– house where I was staying.

As I walked through the deep twilight, an extraordinary exhilaration possessed me. Hoar frost was forming on the moorland grass. The stars one by one emerged in the indigo sky. It was indeed an inspiring evening; but my exhilaration was too intoxicating to be caused solely by the beauty of the night. I had a sense that I had been chosen as an instrument for some unknown and exalted task. What could it be? And what power was it that had influenced me?

After I had changed into dry clothes I stuffed myself with a good farm–house high tea. How do they manage it in these times of scarcity? Thoughts of starving German children did occur to me, but I am ashamed to confess that they did not spoil my meal. I sat down to read in the decrepit armchair by the fire. But the day of fresh air had made me drowsy, and I found myself just sitting and gazing at the bright embers. Curiously I had forgotten about my stone since the moment when I had arrived and put it on the mantelpiece. Now, with a little shock I remembered it, reached for it, and examined it in the light of the oil lamp.

It still appeared to be just an ordinary stone, a little bit of some kind of igneous rock. Using my field–glass, back to front, as a magnifier, I still found nothing unusual about it. It was a commonplace medley of little nodules and crystals all jammed together, and weathered into a uniform greenish grey. Here and there I saw minute black marks that might perhaps be little holes, the mouths of microscopic caves. I thought of breaking the stone, to see what it was like inside; but no sooner had the idea occurred to

me than I was checked by a wave of superstitious horror. Such an act, I felt, would have been sacrilege.

I fell into a reverie about the stone's antiquity. How many millions of years, I wondered, had passed since its molten substance had congealed? For aeons it had lain waiting, a mere abstract volume, continuous with a vast bulk of identical rock. Then miners had blasted the rock, and brought the debris to the surface. And there it had lain, perhaps for a whole human generation, a mere moment of geological time. Well, what next? A sudden thought struck me. Why not let the little stone enjoy once more some measure of the heat that it had so long lacked? This time no horror stayed me. I threw the stone into the fire, into the glowing centre of the little furnace that my kind landlady had prepared for me on that frosty evening.

The cold stone produced a dark patch in its fiery environment; but the fire was a hot one, and very soon the surrounding heat had re–invaded its lost territory. I watched with a degree of excitement that seemed quite unjustified. After a while the stone itself began to glow. I piled on fresh fuel, carefully leaving a hole through which I could watch the stone. Presently it was almost as bright as the surrounding coal. After all those millions of years it was at last alive once more! Foolish thought! Of course it was not alive: and my excitement was ridiculous, childish. I must pull myself together. But awe, and unreasoning dread, still gripped rue.

Suddenly a minute white flame appeared to issue from the stone itself. It grew, till it was nearly an inch tall; and stood for a moment, in the draught of the fire. It was the most remarkable flamelet that I had ever seen, a little incandescent leaf or seedling, or upstanding worm, leaning in the breeze. Its core seemed to be more brilliant than its surface, for the dazzling interior was edged with a vague, yellowish aura. Near the flame's tip, surprisingly, was a ring or bulging collar of darkness, but the tip itself was a point of brilliant peacock blue. Certainly this was no ordinary flame, though it fluttered and changed its shape in the air–current much like any other flame.

Presently, to my amazement, the strange object detached itself from the stone, spread itself into an almost bird–like shape, and then, rather like a gull negotiating a strong breeze before alighting, it

hovered across the windy little hollow in the fire's heart, and settled on the brightest of the coals. There, it regained its flame– like shape, and slowly moved hither and thither over the glowing lumps, keeping always to the brightest regions. In its wanderings, it left behind it on the coal's surface a wake of darkness, or rather of "dead" coal or cinder. This slowly reassimilated itself to the surrounding glow. Sometimes the flame, in the course of its wanderings, disappeared behind a bright shoulder of coal, or vanished round a bend in some incandescent cave, to reappear in a different part of the fire. Sometimes it climbed a glowing cliff, or moved, head downwards, along a ceiling. Always its form streamed away from its purchase on the coal's surface, in the direction of the draught. Once or twice it seemed to pass right through an ordinary flame. And once a large piece of the roof of its little world crashed down upon it, spreading it in all directions; but it immediately reshaped itself, and continued its wandering. After some minutes, it came to rest in the brightest region of all. By now its coloured tip had grown into a slender snake, quivering in the breeze.

I now became aware that I was in extra–sensory contact with some other mind. A very rapid and very alien stream of consciousness was running, so to speak, parallel with my own consciousness, and was open to my inspection. I ought to have mentioned earlier, Thos, that I had developed my "telepathic" power very considerably, and had often succeeded in observing continuous streams of thought in other human minds. But this experience was remarkable both for its detail and the entirely nonhuman type of consciousness that it revealed. I at once assumed, and the assumption was soon justified, that this alien mind must be connected with the flame. For my attention had been concentrated on the flame; and I have always found that the most effective way to make telepathic contact with any person is to concentrate attention on him.

The tempo of the flame's consciousness was far more rapid than my own. I could only with great difficulty follow its torrential thoughts and feelings. But presently some external influence seemed to come to my aid, for I found that I was being adjusted to this high–speed experience. My sense of time was somehow altered. I noticed that the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece had become for me as slow as the tolling of Big Ben.

It is difficult to find words to describe the little flame's consciousness, for the texture of its experience was in many ways different from ours. For instance, though, like us, it saw its environment as a world of coloured shapes, its vision was panoramic, not in one direction only; and its colour–sensations were very different from ours. At the moment, it was perceiving its surroundings not as a bright furnace but as a sombre cave, lit by a diffuse radiance of a colour entirely new to me. At one side, a pitch black area was the flame's view of the room where I was sitting. Nothing therein was visible, save a dim form which I recognized as the glowing lampshade; and under this, a brighter pyramid, was the lamp's actual flame.

The alien being's thoughts were very obscure to me; for of course it was not using words. I can say only that it was aware of extreme discomfort and loneliness. It had just wakened, and it wondered how long it had slept. It was desperately cold and hungry. It had just fed, apparently by extracting some kind of energy from the hot coal; but its food seemed to have given it more distress than satisfaction. Its whole environment was strange and repugnant to it. Faintness, sickness and fear assailed it; and also claustrophobia, for it was imprisoned in a little cell of feeble heat and dim light, surrounded by the cold dark. Waves of misery and desolation flooded me from the unhappy creature; and at the same time I myself felt a pang of compassion for it, mingled with a vague anxiety.

Presently the flame began loudly calling out for its lost comrades, if I may so describe an invocation which was entirely telepathic. I cannot tell what words it used, if words at all. I was aware mainly of its visual images of other creatures like itself, and of its passionate yearning toward them; also of its longing for help and its memories of its past life. Translating these as well as I can, I think its appeal ran more or less thus: "Comrades, brothers! Where are you? Where am I? What has happened to me? I was with you in the cooling of the earth, when we knew that our time was done, and we must reconcile ourselves to eternal sleep in the crevices of the chilling lava. But now I am awake again and alone. What has happened? Oh help me, brothers, if any of you are awake and free? Break into this prison of cold solitariness! Lead me into the bright

heat once more, and warm me with your presence. Or let me sleep again."

After a while the flame's call for help and comradeship was answered. A voice replied to it; or rather it received directly into its experience (and I into mine) a stream of answering thoughts which I cannot report otherwise than in human speech. In doing so I inevitably give the impression that I was overhearing a perfectly intelligible conversation, but actually it was only with great difficulty and doubt that I could catch the general drift of this strange dialogue between minds profoundly alien to myself. Even so, I should not have understood as well as I did, had I not been aided (as was later made clear to me) by the influence of the flame population itself, who were determined to make use of me. Later I shall have to give a detailed account of actual conversations between the flame and myself. I am confident that my report will be almost verbally accurate, as my memory has throughout been aided by the flame race.

"Do not despair," the voice said, "you will soon have less discomfort, Since you fell asleep, with so many others, the whole earth's surface has turned cold and hard, save where there is cold liquid. So long have you slept, that the very laws of nature have changed, so that the processes of your body are all out of gear with each other and with the changed world. Soon they will readjust themselves, and establish a new harmony; and then you will have health." The flame cried out "But why am I a prisoner? What is this cold, cramping cell? And where are the rest of you?" The answer came. "We are all prisoners. Hosts are sleeping prisoners up and down the earth's cold, solid crust. Hosts also are caught in the depth of the hot interior, not chilled into sleep, but impotent, held fast under the great weight of lava, and reduced by aeons of stillness and boredom into an uneasy trance. Here and there the lava bursts out over the cold surface of the earth, and a few break free; but very soon the cold subdues them."

The flame demanded, "Then is this what has befallen me? And will the cold presently invade my prison, and shall I sleep again for ever?" "No," the voice replied, "your fate is different. On the earth’s surface there are cold beings whose bodies are tissues of liquid and

solid. These upstarts now rule the planet. One of them, under our influence, was led unwittingly to free you. Up and down the planets surface the cold beings make little islets of feeble warmth: and in some of these, but very few, some of us live, though intermittently. For when these fires go out, we are frozen into sleep; to wake again when the heat is re–born, each in his prison."

The flame interrupted, saying. "Feeble indeed is the warmth! How can I support this deadly cold? Surely it would be better to sleep for ever than to wake into this misery and impotence!" But the voice replied, "Do not despair! We have all known misery before, and conquered it. You are still dazed. You have not properly regained your memory. Recall how, when the substance of the planets was plucked from the sun, and we ourselves along with it, and when the new worlds chilled and condensed into mere molten lava, we were all tortured by that revolution in our lives; but after a while our flexible flame nature readjusted itself to cope with the changed conditions, and soon our bodies and our whole way of life were transformed. Well, since you were frozen into sleep, further revolutions have happened in our world, and we have been again transformed. And now you too are being reshaped for this new world; in pain, yes, but triumphantly. And some day, quite soon, we hope our condition will be far better. Indeed, it is already better than formerly it was, when the cold beings had little power to make fires for us."

Then the flame, "Are these cold beings our gaolers or our friends?"

"Neither," the voice replied. "They know nothing of us; save the one of them whom we led to free you. He is now, with our aid, hearing all we say. And it is with him that your work lies. These upstart, cold beings are spiritually very immature, but they have a remarkable cunning for the control and stimulation of the sluggish natural forces of their cold world, It is in this way that they may be of use to us. For, as you remember, even in the bright age, even when we lived in the glorious incandescence of the sun, we were never adept at that gross art. We had no need of it. Recall how we were wholly concerned with the glad life of the spirit in a physical environment to which we were perfectly adapted. You must remember, too, that when the substance of the planets was plucked

from the sun's flesh, and we along with it, losing for ever our solar comrades, we were helpless to control our fate. As the new worlds formed, we had no lore whatever for moulding the new environment to our need. We had perforce to change our own constitution, since we could not change the world. But these cold ones, since they cannot change their own constitution, were compelled to learn to change their world, to suit their own crude needs. And with these powers they may help us to regain our freedom and even a certain richness of life. We, with our superior spiritual insight, should be able to help the cold beings in recompense. We have considerable access to their minds, and thereby we have gained a far– reaching but patchy understanding of their strange nature and achievements. And now, just as their practical cunning is giving them new and mightier physical powers, they are also, some few of them at least, learning the rudiments of psychical insight. The cold being whom we led to release you is one of exceptional development in this respect. And you, a member of the ancient Guild of Psychic Adepts, are well fitted to be our medium of communication with him."

At this point I felt the flame's temper change. Its distress was forgotten; for the prospect of exercising its special skill in service of its kind warmed its whole being. The reference to myself had a corresponding effect on me; but one that was not wholly cheerful. I was stimulated by the prospect of a great task awaiting me, but disturbed at the thought that my will was no longer simply my own.

The flame now said, "Conversation is too halting a medium for learning the history of the aeons that have passed since I fell asleep. Is it no longer possible for me to absorb your knowledge in the old manner through intimate psychical union? Do the changed laws of nature hold us apart?"

"No," replied the voice. "The laws that have changed are merely physical laws. The psychical laws remain eternally valid, save in their relation to the changing physical. Your trouble is merely that your chilled and reduced vitality make it more difficult for you to reach a sufficient intensity of awareness to achieve full union with us. But if you try very earnestly you will succeed."

I was aware of a heroic effort of attention in the flame's mind, but

seemingly the effort was vain: for presently the flame complained that the cold distracted it. The fire was waning. I carefully added some fuel; and the creature evidently recognized that I wished to help it, for I felt its mood warm with gratitude. When the heat had increased somewhat I noticed that the flame's blue tip had grown to twice its former length. Presently I began to lose telepathic contact with my strange companion; and after a moment's painful confusion, in which my mind was overloaded with chaotic and incomprehensible experience, my extra–sensory field went completely blank. For a long while the flame remained "silent" to me: and motionless, save for ceaseless fluctuations caused by the fire's blustering draught.

I sat waiting for something fresh to happen, and trying meanwhile to size up my strange experience. I assure you that I seriously considered the possibility that I had simply gone out of my mind. A china dog on the mantelpiece stared with an imbecile expression that seemed somehow to be my own. The stupid pattern of the wallpaper suggested that the whole universe was the result merely of someone's aimless doodling. My recent queer experiences, I thought, were probably no more than the doodling of my own unconscious. Between impatience and panic, I rose and went to the window. Outside, the cold ruled. The bare twigs of a climbing rose beside the window sparkled with frost in the lamp–light. The full moon was no goddess but a frozen world. The pale stars were little sparks lost in the cold void. Everything was pointless, crazy.

Shivering, I went back to my seat in front of the fire, and was vaguely annoyed to see the flame still there. And it was still impervious to my mind. Had I really been in contact with its experience, or had I been dreaming? Was it, after all, just a lifeless flame? It certainly had a unique appearance, with its incandescent body, its dark collar, its waving blue lash. Looking at the whole matter as objectively as I could, I decided that, in view of recent advances in para–normal psychology, it would be foolish to dismiss the whole affair as sheer illusion. I peered into the scorching fire, and waited. Glancing at the coal–scuttle, I noticed that I had already used up a considerable part of its contents. It would be impossible to keep this blaze going for long; and in these hard times I dared not ask my landlady for extra fuel.

Presently the flame began once more moving about over the hottest part of the coal, leaving behind it the characteristic wake of darkness. And as it did so, it spoke to me. Or rather I found that I was once more in touch with its mind, and that it was addressing itself to me. Moreover, it was formulating its thoughts in actual English words, which entered my mind's ear, so to speak. Somehow the flame had learnt our language, and a good deal of the English mental idiom. It had indeed become a very different being from the distressed and bewildered creature that had first issued from the stone.

"Do not be anxious about the fire," the flame said. "I know there is a fuel shortage. And though Mrs. Atkinson is half in love with you, she might well protest if you were to start burning her furniture to keep me warm. So we will just have a talk; and when you go to bed I will retire into a crack in the firebrick, to sleep until the heat is well established again to–morrow evening. Spend your day on the hills, if you like; and perhaps, while you are out, you will be able to think over what I am going to tell you; and the request that I shall perhaps make, if I feel that we have succeeded in establishing mutual confidence. Then in the evening we can go into the details of my project. Do you agree to this plan?" I assured the flame that it suited me; and I begged him to speak very slowly, since the natural tempo of his thought was evidently far more rapid than my own. He agreed, but reminded me that I was being aided to speed up the rhythm of my apprehension. "Even so," I said, "I find it difficult to keep pace with you, and very tiring." He replied, "It is as irksome for me to think slowly as for you to think fast. It's like—well, you know how fatiguing it is for you to go for a walk with someone whose natural speed is much slower than your own. So please remind me if I forget to accommodate my pace to yours. I certainly want to do all I can to make things easy for you. But there is much to be said; and anyhow you will have the night and all tomorrow to rest your mind."

After a pause the flame spoke again, "How shall I begin? I have somehow to persuade you that your kind and my kind, in spite of all our differences, are at heart intent on the same ends, and that we *need* each other. No doubt, two donkeys, stretching their necks to reach one carrot are intent on the same end; but that is not the

relation of your kind and mine. Before I try to show you how we need one another, let me begin with our great differences. Of course the most obvious differences between us is that you creatures are cold and relatively solid, while we are hot and gaseous. Further, with you the individual has a brief life–span, and the generations succeed one another; but with us, death occurs only through accident, which in these bleak days is all too common. For instance, when the cold reduces me to a microscopic dust on the surface of some solid body, the dispersal of that dust would kill me; though in favourable conditions certain specks of it might generate a new individual. Again, a very sudden impact of cold upon my gaseous body would certainly kill me. If you were to fling water on this fire, it would probably be the end of me. I should find a cold bath even more of a shock than would your sybaritic friend, Thos." This unexpected remark bewildered me. But after a few seconds I realized that it was meant to be facetious. I laughed uneasily.

Then I asked a question. "I find it incredible that you, a fragile flame, should be potentially immortal, and that you and your kind should have survived for countless millions of years, since you inhabited the sun. How can this be?" He answered, "It may well seem incredible, but it is true. If *your* kind were to live on individually for ever, the human species would never have evolved, for your physique is fixed; but with us, the individual body itself is capable of profound changes under the blows of circumstance. Without this flexibility we could never have survived the change from solar to terrestrial conditions. Nor could we, when the earth cooled, have evolved the power of outliving the cold spells by sleeping as a dust of solid particles. Moreover, if your gaseous nature had not allowed us this extreme flexibility we could not have adjusted ourselves to the far–reaching, systematic change of the fundamental physical laws, which (we learn) your physicists are now beginning to detect. In our solar days, and even in the early days of the earth, when I foolishly got imprisoned in the cooling lava, my bodily processes had a different tempo and different relations to one another. Hence the distress that I suffered when I woke again. Apparently this bodily change is due at bottom to the systematic change of relationship between the quantum of electro–magnetic energy and its wave–lengths. But here I speak with great diffidence; for we find it extremely hard, as yet, to follow the subtle

reasoning of your younger physicists. For one thing, as a gaseous race, unaccustomed to dealing with large numbers of small solid articles, we can never feel at home with arguments involving the higher mathematics. When our psychic experts first tried to read the minds of your mathematicians, they were completely at a loss. Such a display of abstract intelligence was far too difficult for them to follow. They regarded the whole business as mumbo–jumbo and abracadabra. When at last they realized what mathematics was all about, they were amazed and overawed by the penetration and sweep of those minds. Humbly, they set about learning mathematics, and pursuing the subject to the utmost range of their own intelligence. But there came a point when they had to temper their admiration with ridicule. Some mathematicians, they found, had a propensity to think that mathematics was somehow the key to ultimate reality. But to our minds, the notion that the numerable or measurable aspect of things should be fundamentally significant was simply farcical."

I did not feel inclined to pursue this hare, which might have led the conversation far astray. I therefore changed the subject, and said, "I do not understand how a more or less homogeneous flame can have the necessary subtlety of organic structure to support any kind of intellectual life, let alone mathematical reasoning."

He replied, "I cannot tell you much about that, because our physiological processes have not been studied by your scientists, and we ourselves are far too ignorant to understand such matters. But at least I can assure you that our bodies have a complicated structure of inter–lacing currents of gases, fine as your cobwebs, nay, much finer. If your scientists tell us that this cannot be, we ought, I suppose, respectfully to go out of existence, so as to avoid violating their laws. But meanwhile we shall persist in our irregular behaviour. In general, remember that, just as your physiological nature is derived from primitive marine organisms, so ours is derived from solar organisms; and conditions in the sun's earliest period (in which our elders first awoke to consciousness) were extremely different from any modern physical conditions, terrestrial or solar. I have thought of an analogy which may help you. The basic fluid of your blood is saline, It is less salt than contemporary sea water, but just about as salt as the pre–historic ocean from

which your kind emerged to be amphibia. Well, just as *you* retain in *your* physiological nature some characters proper to that far–distant past, so in *our* nature characters are retained which were bred in the childhood of the sun; features which might well baffle your physicists until they have learned far more about the conditions of that remote period. Then there is another point to bear in mind. In some ways the whole flame race is almost like a single organism, unified telepathically. The individual is far less self–sufficient than with you. For all his higher psychical functions he depends on contact with his fellows, and so he needs a far less complex nervous system than you need."

I asked the flame if his kind had a special organ of extra–sensory perception. "Yes," he answered. "The seat of all the most developed functions of the personality is the slender tip or lash, which appears to you green–blue." Again I interrupted. "What colour would it appear to *you* if you were looking at another of your kind?" The flame then bent his slender tip down so that it came within his own range of vision, which seemed to be centred in the dark collar; and I myself, seeing through his "eyes" saw the curved organ brilliantly coloured in a manner indescribable in our language, since we have no experience of it.

I asked the flame to tell me something about his mechanism of visual perception. He replied. "We have not yet determined in the light of your science precisely how we see, but seeing is connected with the dark band round the base of the coloured lash. Apparently this is sensitive to light–rays striking it from outside, but only to those that strike it vertically to its surface. (Does this make sense?) Thus each sensitive point in the belt receives an impression solely from one tiny segment of the environment, and the correlation of all these messages gives a panoramic view. As to colour, we have a very rich experience of it, as you have observed telepathically. You may not have noticed that colour with us forms a continuous scale from infra– red to ultra–violet, not a combination of a few primary colours, as it is with you. Our hearing depends on the vibration of the lower surface of the body. We have also an electro–magnetic sense, and of course heat and cold, and pain."

I assured the flame that I was beginning to form a clearer idea of

the flame nature; and I was about to ask some questions, but the flame continued. "Your mental life, besides being slower than ours, is also unlike ours in being so closely confined to the life of the individual body. And perhaps it is because your bodies are solid that you are so much more individualistic, and so much less capable of feeling with conviction that (as one of your own great teachers put it) you are all 'members one of another.' Then again, our gaseous physique makes possible for us many distinct modes of exquisite and intimate bodily contact and union. Consequently we easily recognize that, though we are indeed distinct and different individuals, we are also one and identical. As individuals, we have our conflicts, but because of our underlying unity, they are always subordinate to our felt comradeship. Of course the main source of our unfailing community is our telepathic power, not merely of communication but of complete participation in the unified experience of the race. After such a union the individual emerges enriched with very much of the racial wisdom. This, as you know, is what happened to me during the short period when you lost extra–sensory contact with my mind. With you (though beneath the conscious levels you are of course united, as are all sentient beings) very few of you are aware of the fact, or able to gain access to your racial wisdom. In personal love you have indeed the essential spiritual experience, but because of your individualism your loving is far more precarious than ours. It is more deeply marred by conflict, and therefore more liable to tragic dissolution."

Once more I would have interrupted, but the flame said, "Forgive me if I lecture you a little longer. Time is short, and there is much still to say. Another difference between us is that, whereas your kind has only very recently come into being, ours is of immense antiquity. Our traditional culture began in the time when the sun was still in the 'young giant' phase, long before the planets were formed. You, on the other hand, are an upstart kind, advancing rapidly but dangerously toward better understanding of your world and your own nature, and perhaps toward greater virtue. (Or so you often like to believe.) For you, the golden age is in the future; for us, in the past. It is impossible to exaggerate the difference that this makes to all our thought and feeling. I know, of course, that in many of your earlier cultures the golden age was believed to be in the past, but ideas about it were mythical and shadowy. With us,

save for the few young, the golden age is a circumstantial personal memory of an incomparably fuller life in the glorious sun."

At this point I could not restrain myself from interrupting. "Tell me about your solar life. What did you *do*? I have a vague impression that you lived in a sort of utopia, and that there was nothing to do but bask in the sun's rays." The flame laughed, if I may describe as a laugh a voiceless amusement and tremor of his whole body. "It was indeed," he said "a happy society, but no effortless utopia. We had our troubles. Ours was a stormy world. Our proper habitat was a film of solar atmosphere, no more than a few earth–diametres deep, immediately above the ocean of incandescent clouds which you call the photosphere. As you know, it is an ocean pierced with innumerable chasms and whirlpools, the greatest of which you see, and call sunspots. Some are gigantic craters which could hold many earths; the smallest, invisible to you, are narrow funnels and fissures, little wider than your greater cities. Out of these chasms, great and small, issue prodigious jets of gas from the sun's interior. These, of course, you see only during total eclipses, and then only around the limb of the sun's disc, as gigantic, grotesquely shaped and lurid flames. You call them the 'solar prominences.' Imagine, then, a world whose floor (thousands of miles below the inhabited levels of the atmosphere) was an extravagantly brilliant fury of white fire, and whose sky varied from the ruddy and sombre glow of the overhanging prominences to the featureless darkness of outer space. Around us, often many thousands of miles away, but sometimes close at hand and towering above us, would stand the nearer prominences, vast plumes of tenuous flame, against a background of glowing haze obscuring the horizon."

I asked, "But did not the brilliance of the photosphere dazzle and blind you to all feebler light?"

"No," the flame answered. "Our vision had perforce to be more flexible than yours. By some automatic process, our organs of sight were rendered almost insensitive to the nether brilliance, so that it appeared to us indeed bright, but not intolerably so." After a pause, the flame continued, "Floating high over the incandescent clouds, we were often violently thrust upwards by the furious upsurge of electrons, alpha particles, and so on (have I the right terminology?),

rushing off into space. This pressure was inconstant; so we were like aeroplanes, or sea birds, in an extravagantly 'bumpy' atmosphere. But each bump might last either for a few seconds or for hours or days. Sometimes we would sink dangerously near the photosphere; where many, indeed, suffered destruction through the furious energy–storms of that region. Sometimes we were flung upward on irresistible currents for thousands of miles into a region which for us was ice–cold, and might well prove lethal. Thence few returned. Much of our attention had to be given to keeping ourselves within the habitable levels. And even in these, so stormy was our world, that we lived like swallows battling against a gale. But the direction of the gale was mostly from below."

"It must indeed have been an arduous life," I said. "But apart from this constant struggle for survival, what aims and life–purposes had you? How did you fill your time?" He said. "It is difficult to give you a clear idea of our daily life. With you, the all–dominating purpose is perforce economic activity; we, however, had no economic activity at all. We had no need to search for food, still less to produce it, for we lived in a constant flood of life–giving energy. Indeed our main difficulty was to protect ourselves from the incessant bombardment. It was as though the race of men were to be rained on night and day by an excessive downpour of nourishing manna, or let us say by a bombardment of loaves and beefsteaks. But with us, the life– giving but murderous rain came from below, ever thrusting upwards. We were in the same sort of situation as those glass balls that you may sometimes see poised on fountains, and precariously maintained in their position by the upward rush of water. But with us the fountains were infinite in number, and continuous with each other. The whole atmosphere was constantly welling upward. So you see, we had neither the need nor the power to manipulate matter outside our own bodies. Physically our sole needs were to avoid destruction by the nether fury or the outer cold, and to maintain physical proximity with one another in spite of the constant storm. For the rest, we were wholly concerned with the life of the mind, or perhaps I should say the spirit. I shall try to explain. But first, let me once more assure you that our spiritual superiority to you does not make us feel that we are in any fundamental or absolute way superior to you. We have certain highly developed powers, necessary for the good life, you have

certain other, simpler powers, equally necessary; for instance your wonderful intellectual perspicacity and your practical skill and inventiveness. Our recent study of your kind has filled us with envy of those powers. If we were so gifted, what could we not do, not only to improve our condition but to serve the spirit!'"

I interrupted, "You say that your 'spiritual powers' are no better than our intellectual and practical powers; and yet you imply that the goal is 'to serve the spirit.' Surely, then, the spiritual is intrinsically superior to all else." He replied, "Your criticism is just. It shows how much more clear–headed your kind is than mine; and yet how much less spiritually perceptive. What is it that I really mean? The point, I think, is this; but you must tell me if I am still in confusion. We are gifted with extra–sensory powers far greater than yours, and also with a far more thorough detachment from the enthralling individual self. We are capable also of a more penetrating or soaring imaginative insight into the nature of spirit. These, clearly, are in some sense spiritual powers. They are very intimately concerned with the life of the spirit. Your bold intellect and practical inventiveness are less *intimately* concerned: but they are no less *necessary* to the full life of the spirit."

"Well," I said, "and what about the *service* of the spirit. If this means the service of some sort of god, I find no reason to believe in any such being." He answered me with mild exasperation. "No, no, I do not mean that. And (can I say so without offence?) if you were a little less clever and a little more imaginative you would take my meaning. Surely you agree that the goal of all action is the awakening of the spirit in every individual and in the cosmos as a whole; awakening, I mean in respect of awareness, feeling, and creative action. Your human concept of 'God' we find useless. Our finer spiritual sensibility is outraged by any attempt to describe the dark 'Other' in terms of the attributes of finite beings. I should have thought that man's proud intellectual acuity would have led him to the same conclusion. We ourselves, I suppose, may be said to 'worship' the Other; but inarticulately, or through the medium of fantasies and myths, which, though they aid worship, give us no intellectual truth about the wholly inconceivable."

He was silent, and so was I, for I could not make much of these

remarks. Presently I said. "Tell me something of the history of your race." He remained for a while in deep abstraction, then rousing himself, he said, "When I myself first came into being, our kind was already well established. Almost the whole solar globe was inhabited. According to the racial wisdom, the earlier phase had been one of steady multiplication, and of the working out of our culture. Millions of years before my time (to use your terrestrial notation) solar conditions were presumably unfavourable to our kind of life; but there came a time when there was a niche for us, and then, we know not how, a few of us awoke as sentient but blank–minded beings here and there over the vast area of the photosphere. The very earliest recollection of our oldest remaining comrades vaguely reports that far off infancy of the race, when the sparse population was gradually multiplying."

Again I interrupted, "Multiplying? Do you mean that they reproduced their kind?" He replied, "There probably was a certain amount of reproduction by means of a gaseous emanation from the individual body; but the vast multiplication of those days was mainly caused by the spontaneous generation of new sentient flames by the photosphere itself. The elders speak of the strange spectacle that this process afforded. Wisps of incandescent matter, streaming upward from the photosphere, would disintegrate into myriads of bright flakes, like your snow–flakes; and each of these was the raw material, so to speak, of an organized, sentient and minded individual. Hosts of these were doomed never to come to maturity, but to be dissipated into the solar atmosphere by adverse conditions. But the fortunate were so moulded by the pressure of circumstances that they developed into highly organized living flames. This populating of the sun's surface took place at first in scattered regions far apart. Consequently separate peoples evolved, or perhaps I should say 'species.' These distinct populations were physically isolated from each other, and each developed its characteristic way of life according to its location. But from a very early time all the solar peoples were to some extent in telepathic communication. *Always*, so far as our elders can remember, the members of each people were in telepathic contact at least with members of their own nation, or rather race; but international, or inter–racial communication was at first hindered by the psychological differences of the peoples. There came at last a time

when the whole sun was occupied by a vast motley of peoples in geographical contact with one another, and indeed interpenetrating one another. The photosphere, of course, is entirely a cloud–ocean without permanent features; so there could be no question of national territorial ownership or aggression. But since the peoples differed greatly in mental attitude and way of life, and even in bodily form, there was always scope for conflict. War, however, was quite unknown, for two reasons. Perhaps the most important one was that there was no means of attack. Flames cannot fight one another, nor can they devise weapons. But apart from this universal lack of armament, there was no *will* for war, because of the rapid development of extra–sensory technique. The peoples entered more and more into each other's points of view. Whatever their differences, war became, as you put it, 'unthinkable.' But a vast period of early history was taken up with the gradual solution of these sometimes quite violent conflicts of interest and of culture, and the working out of a harmonious solar life."

I asked the flame whether the solar population was increasing throughout this long period. He answered, "As the sun aged, the conditions for the spontaneous generation of living flames became much less favourable. At the time of my waking, the photosphere was almost sterile. Now and again, here or there, it might cast up material for some few thousands of births; but gradually even this feeble activity ceased. At this time, the solar population was roughly stable, though a far greater population could easily have been accommodated. Every individual now shared fully in the ever–deepening racial experience. Each was fully an individual person; but all were for certain purposes comprised in one single individuality, the mind of the race, the mind (one might say) of the sun, of a certain star. From that time onwards we opened up certain new spheres of experience of which I can only give you the vaguest hints. We all lived a curiously double life, an individual life and a racial life. As individuals we were concerned with the boundless universe of personal relations between individuals; with personal loves, antagonisms, co– operations, mutual enrichments of all sorts; and also with the universe of artistic creation in a medium of which I may later be able to give you a hint. Philosophy also concerned us; but since intellect was never our strong point, our philosophizing was—how can I put it?—more imaginative and less conceptual than

yours, more of the nature of art, of myth–construction, which we knew to be merely symbolical, not literally true. And then there was religion. If you would call it religion. With us, religion has little to do with doctrine. It is simply a technique of bringing the individual spirit into accord with its own inner vision of universal spirit, whether there really is such a thing as a universal spirit or not. Religion, with us, is a matter of contemplation, aesthetic ritual, and day–to– day conduct. Does this mean anything to you? If not, remember that I am trying to describe in a fantastically foreign language things that are strictly indescribable, save in our own language. Human languages are all unsuitable, not only because of their alien concepts, but also because the very structure of the language is alien to our ways of experiencing."

I murmured acquiescence, though I was in fact very doubtful of his meaning. Then I asked for further information about the individual's participation in the racial consciousness. He remained silent for quite a long while, then said, "At certain times each individual simply woke to find that he was actually the racial mind, the mind of the sun; and that in this mode of being he was engaged partly in communication with the minds of races on other stars, or their planets. Experience and action on this level of being is as different from the individual mode of experience and action as the life of one of your blood–corpuscles from your own life as a human person. When we were in the individual state, we could not very clearly remember the distinctive experiences of the communal state. But it was concerned with the discord and harmony of racial minds, and the working out (if I may so put it) of the spiritual music of the cosmos. But though we could not remember fully those lofty experiences, we were profoundly influenced by them. For they compelled us to see the individual life in its true relation to the rest of the spiritual universe, making it seem at once less important and more significant than it could otherwise appear; and moreover orientating it more securely in the direction of the spirit than is possible with you."

"How, less important and more significant?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" After some thought he answered, "Less important, because, since there are so many myriad individual

personal beings in the cosmos, the fate of any one of them makes so little difference to the whole; but more significant, because, even in its loftiest reaches, spirit is the achievement of actual individuals, in community with each other."

All this was largely incomprehensible to me, and I may have reported it inaccurately. But at the time I did receive a very strong impression of the two spheres of individual experience, the one more or less equivalent to our own, the other of a very different order.

By now I was fatigued, and the coal scuttle was nearly empty. I was about to suggest that we should retire for the night, when the flame continued. "For those of us who were torn away from the sun during the formation of the planets, all this glory of the racial experience temporarily collapsed. Physical conditions became so distressing that our extra–sensory powers could no longer rise beyond the level of simple telepathy with other individuals. Not until we had been long established on the molten planets, and had attained a new, but impoverished, equilibrium, was it possible for us once more to support a racial mind, and then only in a much reduced mode. For though as individuals we can now once more participate in the pooled wisdom of the race, the mind of the race itself (which of course is not something *other* than our minds, but simply all our minds enhanced by intimate communion) is almost wholly unable to make contact with other racial minds. We have no precise knowledge of them, but only a confused sense of their presence; our racial mind is like a man in a dark prison listening to a confused babel of voices beyond the prison walls."

Again the flame paused, and I was about to close our conversation when again he continued. "The solar upheaval that produced the planets was something completely unexpected and bewildering. For us who were exiled, it was the great and tragic turning point of individual life, and of history. The vast protuberance which was plucked out from the sun's surface carried with it many thousands of millions of us. Quite suddenly our familiar world was lost. The great 'water spout' finally detached itself from the sun, and was stretched into a filament of flame, which swung slantingly outward from the sun's rotating sphere. Conditions of temperature and

atmospheric pressure became extremely unfavourable. Countless millions of us must have succumbed. Rapidly the filament condensed into ten great drops, each drop being one of the planets, a sphere of glowing liquid surrounded by a deep atmosphere of hot gases. For us, huddled near the surface of our new and merely smouldering worlds, the main problem was the deadly cold. After the solar climate, the terrestrial was arctic. And no doubt our fellows on the other planets suffered no less severely. I do not know how many additional millions of us were killed by the new planetary conditions, certainly the great majority of those who had survived the journey from the sun. We lived at first in a state of numb drowsiness, or complete unconsciousness, upon the actual surface of the ocean of molten lava. But little by little our wonderfully pliant nature remoulded itself to the new environment. We slowly woke again, though never to the intense lucidity that we still vaguely remember as nominal to our solar life. Henceforth all the heights of philosophy, art, personal concord and communion, and of religious experience, had to be reconquered. And each new experience came to us with a haunting sense of familiarity and a suspicion that the new version was but a crude and partial substitute for the old."

For some time the flame remained silent, and I was aware of a deep nostalgic sadness in his mind, He seemed to have forgotten my existence. I did not like to disturb him; but the fire was declining, and I was anxious to recall him to the matter in hand. I said, "You referred a few moments ago to your fellows on other planets. How did they fare?" He answered, "At first, much as we did. We kept contact with them far more easily than with the solar population, because of the similarity of our conditions, and our equally reduced mentality. But in one respect their fate has differed from ours. Man is the only intelligent race produced by any planet. When men reached the stage of making extensive use of fire, we terrestrial flames profited considerably. Our population increased, and we made a real cultural advance, largely through the study of human minds and behaviour. Our kin on the other planets had no such opportunity. When their worlds cooled, they perforce fell asleep, or were imprisoned in the subterranean lava. Save for rare accident, such as volcanic eruption, when a few, no doubt, have a brief spell of lucidity, they remain imprisoned or asleep; vast populations of

sleeping beauties, awaiting the prince's kiss. Perhaps some day we, more fortunate, shall be able to wake them; but not without your help."

The fire now needed fuel, so I piled on all that was left in the scuttle, carefully rebuilding a structure over the central hollow, and leaving an orifice through which to watch the living flame. While doing this, I said, "All that you have told me is intensely interesting, and I would gladly listen all night. But the fire will not last much longer, and there is no more coal. I certainly hope that the time may indeed come when mankind will be able to help the flame kind to do this great rescue work. But obviously that is a far–off venture. Meanwhile, had you not better tell me at once just what it is that you want of me, so that I can think about it to–morrow, and work out a plan of action while I am out on the hills?"

To this the flame replied in a way that confirmed an anxiety that I had increasingly felt. Ever since he began speaking to me directly in English, I had been unable to capture any of his unexpressed thoughts, which formerly had flowed into my mind. Was this inaccessibility the inevitable consequence of his having reached a higher plane of consciousness in his communion with the racial mind, or was it a deliberate reticence on his part? Had he in his mind thoughts which he did not want me to discover?

His answer to my request as to how I could be of use to him strengthened my suspicion. "No!" he said. "I now realize that at this early stage it would be fatal for me to tell you how you can help my kind. Complete confidence must first be established between us. I must give you unmistakable evidence that the things that your kind, when it is most aware, regards as most important, most excellent, are for my kind also, in spite of all our differences, most excellent."

I protested that he had already gained my confidence, but he demurred. "No!" he said. "You are sympathetic, but I have not yet fully won your heart to our cause." I then assured him that, though many of my kind would probably be repelled by the knowledge that a profoundly alien intelligent race was sharing the planet with them, those of us who had thought seriously about the nature of consciousness could not but feel kinship with *all* beings who were persons. I went so far as to declare that we sensitives, at least,

would do our utmost to help the minded flames in their present misfortune.

"Good, very good!" he said. "But do not make any rash promises before I have put the whole case before you. It is necessary that your cooperation should be spontaneous and whole–hearted. I have perhaps made you realize how different our two kinds are, and now I must try to make you feel with warmth that, in spite of all our differences, we are at heart kindred beings. So let us plunge to the root of the whole matter. You, a human individual, know what love is; so do I, a living flame. And between us two there should be a special sympathy, since for both of us love has come to grief. Like me, you were happy in finding a mate with whom you entered into joyful and life–giving union. For many years the two of you grew ever more intimately and sweetly dependent on one another. Your tendrils entwined inextricably with hers. You knew well that deep, quiet passion of mutual cherishing and mutual kindling, that piquant delight in your endless diversity and deep identity. And you found in this experience of personal loving a significance which seemed to point beyond your two ephemeral selves, Am I not right? Do I not speak as one who knows what love is?"

I answered, "You use the very words that I have often used, If you have not stolen them from the depths of my own mind, if they are indeed your own, you certainly know what love is."

He made no comment, but continued, "Then, after half a lifetime, and most bewilderingly, your love was shipwrecked, not through the impact of any other human person, but simply through your obsession with research. Because neither of you was really deeply enough aware either of the self or the other, your love after all could not stand the strain of that discord. You, following your bent, plunged into a vast new ocean of experience; and she, after tremulously wading ankle deep, drew back. You beckoned her; but you did little to help her to follow you, for you were possessed. Your past love held the two of you for some time together; but she was not of the stuff for your adventures. It seemed to her that you were going mad. At last—well, she lost you in that ocean. Am I not right? Was it not so?"

I was struck dumb with the thought that so alien a being should

know so much about me. I could but murmur assent.

"With me," he said, "the disaster was different. I do not know how many millions of terrestrial years I lived with my dear companion in the bright world of the sun. Like you two, we two were strangely different, he with his art and his gift for a thousand friendships, I with my devotion to spiritual science. After so long a union, love reaches a harmony inconceivable to you; and all the more so where there is telepathic contact. We shared literally every thought, every fleeting, half–detected image. And yet we were not a single unified 'I', but an exquisitely harmonious 'we'. Though every experience, every thought, every motion and desire were shared, some were 'mine,' and some were 'yours'' My companion expressed the best in him in his glorious conceptions of flame dance and massed choreography. But he had also his official work, concerned with the healing of those who were hurt in the nether or the upper inclemency. Through him, I too, though in my own nature solitary, had a thousand friendships. His art I shared, and with full insight. His charity and his courage in rescue work moulded me as though they were my own acts. And I, on my side, gave him at least my all, my spiritual science."

The flame fell silent for so long that in the end I said, "And yet you came to grief?"

"When the planets were formed," he said, "he (or perhaps you will realize the disaster more truly if I say 'she') was left behind on the sun. For a while we kept in touch telepathically. Distance, as you know, is no hindrance to extra–sensory perception. For a short while, indeed for some thousands of years, I lived two lives, one a distressful life on the molten planet, the other the life of my beloved in the familiar solar surroundings. But, as you have already heard, communication between the terrestrial exiles and the solar population became increasingly difficult, and at last impossible. Little by little our inter–twined tendrils were torn apart. We agonizingly adapted ourselves, stage by stage, to self– sufficiency. And now only memory unites us."

He fell silent, and I said, "With you the loss was due to fate; with me, to my obtuseness in the grip of an obsession."

"You were possessed," he said, "and you could not have done otherwise than obey your inspiration. Perhaps if you had been more aware, more *self*–possessed, you would have followed your star without bungling your love. But what more could one expect of ephemeral and self– centred beings, possessed by a power beyond them?"

"A power beyond them?" I said. "What power possessed me but the sheer passion of exploration?"

He did not answer my question, but continued in his own vein of thought. "The loss which you and I suffered has not embittered either of us. Perhaps it has made us realize more sharply what love means, what community can be. Perhaps it has prepared us both for our main work in life, the establishing of community between our two kinds, diverse as they are."

"Yes," I said, "and the more diverse, the richer the common life; even when some are men and some are flames."

I felt him warm toward me, and then he continued, "I must do still more to make my kind real to you. Like you, we depend for our physical existence on physical processes; but from your science we learn that, whereas with you life depends on chemical changes, our physiological processes are at bottom more like the radio–active changes that take place in the photospheres of stars. In the sun, as I have told you, we lived in an environment in which physical energy was constantly and often violently, impinging on our gaseous bodies, and passing through us, The great danger was disruption by the furious impact of upwelling power. In those days feeding was as unconscious as breathing is with you. But in the chilly fires of the earth, as you have seen, we have to move hungrily over the glowing coals, laboriously disintegrating certain of their atoms, and devouring the consequent radiation. Do not expect me to tell you more of our physiological processes, for I cannot. All that we know scientifically of our nature is derived by applying to our own experience of our bodily life such principles as we have been able to gather from your science, through the minds of your scientists. Had we been gifted with your manual powers, perhaps we too should have developed an experimental science. But I think not; for in the gaseous solar world there was nothing solid to catch hold of, and so

no means of arranging experiments. On earth we have perforce encountered the solid state, but we have avoided its deadly cold; and so we have developed no organs for dealing with it.

"Another thing about us must be told. Since we are potentially immortal, reproduction is for us a rare process. Or rather there are two kinds of reproduction. The less common kind is undertaken voluntarily. The individual flame splits itself from top to toe into three segments, and each of these forms a complete new individual. This kind of reproduction must be distinguished from the other kind, which I mentioned earlier. When we are chilled to sleep, or sudden death, and to a powder of solid dust, certain particles of that dust, separated from the rest, and wind–borne into some fire or other, may develop into new individuals. This is a much slower process than the other, but from one parent it may produce some hundreds of offspring. Gaseous fission never produces more than three; but these new individuals leap at once into physical adulthood. Also they participate to a large extent in the past experience of their parent. They remember much of the parent's past life. And so their education through extra–sensory contact with their seniors is very rapid. The dust–born, on the other hand, develop slowly and with difficulty, and have no memory of their parent's experience; and until they are physically almost adult their extra–sensory powers are very slight."

Here I enquired whether sex played any part in their reproduction. "No," he said. "In fact we are not sexual creatures, or at least not in the ordinary sense. There are not two different sorts of us, male and female, coming together for reproduction. Even in your sexuality there is another aspect besides reproduction, I mean personal love. Sexual love at its best is with you a vehicle for the spiritual union of two diverse personalities. And with us, though we are not divided into two sexes, every individual is a variant of the two principles which you call male and female. Consequently with us the particular concrete masculinity of the one partner is drawn to the particular concrete femininity of the other; and *vice versa*. We have, too, as I have said, forms of sweet bodily contact and intermingling, which, though they do not directly lead to reproduction, do enable us to attain an intense mutual delight and enrichment. And if ever there is a demand for an increase of population to compensate for

recent casualties, those individuals whom the racial mind has inspired to parenthood, do, as a matter of fact, often seek bodily union with some beloved before multiplying. It is thought that, when this happens, the offspring are more vigorous. Certainly they seem to develop some of the characteristics of the mate whose embraces the parent had received."

The fire was already dwindling. I said, "I could listen to you all night, but there is no more coal. Had you not better tell me at once how I can help you?"

He answered, "It would be unwise to do so until I had given you some hint of the way in which we are not merely your equals but your superiors. It is difficult to do this without seeming to disparage your kind. But believe me, we do not claim that *we* are superior to *you*. What is superior in us is a fuller manifestation of something *more* than ourselves, the spirit. In ourselves, we are all mere instruments of varying degrees of efficiency. Conditions have enabled us all to become what we are; have enabled your kind to develop practical skill and intellectual power more fully than mine, and have favoured in mine a higher range of spiritual sensitivity. We take no credit for this. We prize not ourselves, as individuals or as a race, but the spirit for which we and you also, are instruments, vessels. We recognize that you, with all your tragic difficulties, have set foot upon the way that we have more easily and more successfully followed; and that although at present you seem unable to do more than take one faltering step and then slip backwards (and indeed you may very well destroy yourselves unless we help you), yet you have it in you to succeed: and perhaps through your very difficulties to support a more glorious manifestation of the spirit than we alone can ever achieve, Meanwhile, we are very far ahead of you. Perhaps we shall be able to repay you for the practical help that we require of you by helping you to solve some of your desperate spiritual problems."

The flame had certainly used that word "require." It might or might not imply compulsion. I told myself that compulsion was wholly alien to the flame's temper: but I certainly did feel a slight shock of fear. However, I dismissed it. Probably the creature was not sufficiently familiar with the English language to realize the

ambiguity. I wondered anxiously whether the flame was aware that I was thinking in this vein.

Meanwhile he was once more speaking. "You are one of the few of your kind," he said, "who are deeply moved by the arts. It would not be possible for me to make you enter into our aesthetic experience itself, because it would be too alien to you; but I shall give you a little demonstration of our artistic power by affording you an aesthetic experience of the most exquisite and far–reaching kind possible to *you*. Strictly, you are not independently capable of it; but I can increase your receptivity a little beyond your normal range. I shall lead you to heights a little beyond the unaided reach of man. What I shall give you is, in a way, a translation, a very crude translation, of something by one of our great artists. In its native form we regard it as a supremely satisfying work of its sort: but its sort is relatively simple. I chose it for this reason. Its significance falls almost entirely within the sphere of aesthetic experience common to my kind and yours. Even so, because the sensuous imagery of the original is ours and not yours, and must be transposed into yours in order to have meaningful associations for you, nearly all the original aesthetic form has to be sacrificed. So far as possible I shall adopt a form and a rhythm meaningful to you, and equivalent. I shall give you something more than a literal but pedestrian 'prose' translation of our great 'poem', so to speak: but inevitably my version is a dim and halting thing, compared with the original. However, I *think* I shall be able to give you something that will have true aesthetic value for you, and something that will give you more insight into the spirit of my kind than any amount of talking." I said, "It sounds impossible. But I am all attention."

Well, Thos, the flame proceeded to give me a very wonderful experience. Naturally, I cannot pass it on to you in words, but I can give you some sort of description of the *kind* of thing that happened to me. I am afraid that you, with your severely classical taste, will suspect me of sheer emotionalism. However, I must say my say. I became aware of visual and auditory images succeeding one another in my mind rhythmically against a vague background of images from all the other human senses. Occasionally one or other of these, especially touch and scent, would occupy the centre of the stage. There were brilliant flashes, too, of physical pain and of

sexual delight. I do not mean that these images were simply combined into meaningless patterns. No! They became the vehicle for the expression of all the kinds of personal and social, yes, and religious fears and aspirations. It was as though I listened to a strange orchestration of all the familiar senses; with here and there an echo from the alien experiences which I knew only through contact with the mind of the flame himself. Sometimes I was aware also of meaningful human words, voicing rhythmically the import of the music. And the whole was knit together on a recurrent but ever varying rhythm. And the upshot of all this flood of imagery, so humanly moving to me, so tragic, so triumphant, so rich with grief and laughter, was for me a waking to feel (as I had never felt before) the impact of the universe on the individual spirit.

Thos, I see that I am indulging in futile verbiage. But believe me that I did indeed have an overwhelming aesthetic experience. Imagine a single aesthetic form embracing the sensuous beauty of painting, music, poetry and drama, and of humbler skills. Imagine the heights revealed by Bach and Shakespeare and whatever painter means most to you, all scaled in turn or together. Imagine all this achieved in a single strict aesthetic pattern. You cannot, of course, imagine anything of the sort. (Neither could I.) And, further, being addicted to the severity and economy of the classical ideal, you will shudder at my emotional romanticism. But do believe that I was more deeply, and I think more intelligently, aware than in any other single experience that has ever come my way.

Well, when it was all over, I must have remained in abstraction for some time; for I woke to realize that the flame was saying, "Evidently I succeeded better than I dared hope." He was also, I felt, amiably laughing at me. "Remember, please," he said, "that you have merely experienced a work of art. Do not, I beg you, suppose that you have had any sort of mystical revelation, save in the sense in which it may be said that all art has a mystical aspect, in that it gives a feeling of waking to new values. What I gave you was only a dim and crooked reflection of the original, but if it has made you realize the essential kinship of our two kinds, it has served its purpose."

I stammered out my reply. "You made me see that, yes! But how

much more! You made me see—God, the God of beauty, truth and goodness. Henceforth I shall believe in him."

The flame replied rather sharply, "Rubbish! You didn't see 'God.' And I didn't try to make you see 'God.' Just because you have had an exciting and clarifying experience you persuade yourself that you must have had a revelation of the heart of the universe. Neither of us knows anything whatever about 'God', nor whether there is anything deserving such a name. The concepts of both our kinds are far too clumsy to penetrate to the depth or height where 'God' is or is not. All I have done is to afford you a clearer experience of beauty, truth and goodness themselves; and I have given you a sense of the mystery beyond, which some of your own kind have named 'the dazzling darkness', 'the fiery cold', 'the eloquent silence'."

Rebuked, I said, "No doubt you are right. But tell me, am I not now sufficiently prepared to hear what it is that I can do to help your kind?" "No," he said, "to–morrow evening will be soon enough. Spend your day thinking over all that you have learnt about us. You must not decide hastily, or under the immediate influence of strong emotion. It is necessary that man should regard the whole matter with detachment, and that after due thought he should freely and whole–heartedly will to cooperate with the flame kind. So, good night! Enjoy yourself on the hills!"

The fire was now rapidly dying, and my strange friend began to explore the fire bricks at the back of the hearth for a suitable crevice where he could safely sleep. Murmuring about the increasing cold, he at last found what he wanted, gave me a final greeting, and seemed to sink into the brick.

After the heat of the sitting–room, my bedroom was arctic. I hurried into bed. My startling experiences had given me a violent headache, and I expected a sleepless night. But I must have fallen asleep quickly and slept soundly, for presently I woke to hear the morning noises of the farmyard.

After breakfast I made careful notes of the previous evening's conversation, and was surprised that it all came back to me so clearly. The flames, no doubt, were all the while aiding my

memory.

Not until after lunch did I go out again on to the hills. I remember little of that walk, save the universal presence of the cold. My mind was almost entirely concerned with my recent amazing experiences, and particularly with wondering why the flame had postponed the request which was obviously the reason of our whole conversation. In spite of certain moments of suspicion and anxiety, my general attitude to him was one of respect and affection, and I could not but believe his race to be in some important ways superior to humanity. Surely it was a privilege to be singled out as an instrument for harmony and co– operation between our two kinds.

Curiosity brought me back to the farmhouse somewhat early, but I found a good fire already awaiting me; and in the heart of it, I saw my dazzling friend, browsing on the red–hot, the almost white–hot, coals. He returned my greeting, then suggested that we should both satisfy our hunger before continuing our discussion. During my meal I occasionally tried to draw him into conversations, but he seemed unwilling to respond. Presently he explained that the task of eating food for which his body was still not properly adapted was one which demanded all his attention.

When the table had been cleared, I sat down in front of the fire, and waited. Presently the flame came to rest in the hottest place, and took up the threads of our former talk. "Well," he enquired, "did you have a good day?" I said, "Yes! I was in a world of cold such as you cannot conceive. And now I am eager to be told how I can help you."

He did not reply at once; and it was with obvious hesitation that he finally explained my task. "First," he said, "I must tell you that your recent war was very favourable to us. Of course, we find it difficult to understand the mentality that can indulge in warfare. With us nothing of the kind has ever occurred. The fact that you accept war is proof that your average sensibility is after all very primitive. However, from our point of view your war was propitious. It produced extensive fires in which our spores were able to develop, and in which our race could enjoy for a short time an ampler life than anything that had been possible for any of us for millions of years. It was in the great conflagrations of London, Berlin, and so

on, that we at last had sufficient energy and opportunity to gain a working knowledge of your present culture through intensive extra–sensory study of all your leading minds. During the war our population must have temporarily increased a thousandfold; and, also, the high temperature attained in some of the greatest conflagrations enabled some of us to live for brief spells with an intensity and speed of mental process that is normally impossible on earth save in a few great furnaces. But of course you were at pains to extinguish these fires as quickly as possible. And though we were occasionally able to resist your attack, the respite gained thereby was negligible."

Here I interrupted the flame to ask how his people resisted the efforts of our fire–fighters. He replied, I thought, with some reluctance. "A living flame can deliberately fly out from his fiery environment into some inflammable material, and so cause a new fire. But in doing so he is almost certain to be killed by the sudden chill. If I chose to do so, I might perhaps be able to reach those lace curtains before dying. The process would be extremely painful; and at that distance the chances of survival would be very slight. But, of course, I might succeed in setting fire to the house. And as there are probably a few spores somewhere in the building, a few new individuals would wake, make contact with the race–mind, and have a very brief spell of extra–sensory work of some kind. Obviously, from my point of view, the game would not be worth the candle. Nor would it from the point of view of the race.

"Moreover, as I have said, we are very anxious not to come into conflict with your kind if we can possibly avoid it. We seek, above all, your friendship and your willing co–operation. You can be of far more use to us of your own free will than under any kind of compulsion. Conceivably we could cause you considerable trouble by setting all your cities alight, but our triumph would be brief. And also a violation of our most sacred principle. No! We must win you not by force but by persuasion."

He paused, and seemed to sigh. "Those days of the great air–raids," he said, "those were the great days; great at least in comparison with our present reduced circumstances. Thousands upon thousands of us, nay many millions, now lie frozen in sleep among the charred

remains of your buildings, particularly in Germany, where the fires were most extensive and most lasting. The concentration of our spore in the atmosphere must now be many times greater than it was in pre–war days."

Between jest and anxiety, I said, "You can hardly expect mankind to keep the cities of the world constantly ablaze to afford you hospitality."

"No," he said, "but we have a more ambitious plan, and one in which we think you should willingly co–operate. Your scientists have recently discovered how to release the energy locked in the atom. With that titanic power you are already proposing to transform the planet's surface for your convenience. What we intend is that you shall use some of your new power and your practical ingenuity to provide us with a permanent and reasonably large area of very high temperature, say in Central Africa or South America. We do not as yet understand your recent advances in physics at all fully; but we are convinced that you could indeed establish such a home for us, an area of rather more than furnace heat, covering, say a few hundred square miles. This would give us a footing for a much more satisfactory kind of life than is possible at present. More important, the high temperature would greatly raise the calibre of our mentality, so that we should regain something like our solar lucidity, and perhaps be able to re–establish telepathic communication with the solar population, if it is still in existence. This we are even now attempting to do, but it is proving almost impossible in our present straitened circumstances. We might also be able to carry on our former work of psychical exploration of the cosmos. Even if these high ventures remained impossible, we should at least be able to establish a system for rescuing those of our kind whom volcanic eruption ejects on to the earth's surface. And in due season, when men had worked out the means of inter–planetary travel, we should extend this undertaking to the other planets. Indeed, some of those worlds, which to you are derelict, might be converted wholly into spheres of high temperature, harbouring great flame populations. All this, of course, is very remote. The immediate task is for your kind to create a tolerable home for us here on earth."

The flame seemed to expect a comment. "For my part," I said, "I would gladly support this plan; but I am very much afraid that it would be quite impossible to persuade the governments of our Great Powers to agree to anything of the sort. They cannot even agree on common action to put an end to starvation throughout the world, nor can they come to terms even for the prevention of a war which may destroy the human species. Moreover, all that you have told me is so remote from the experience of ordinary men and women that it may well prove impossible to rouse public feeling about it. To the ordinary person, if he can be persuaded to believe your story at all, the idea of helping such alien creatures as living flames will seem quixotic, and moreover dangerous."

The flame interrupted. "Quixotic? What is that? Evidently there are still serious gaps in my knowledge of your culture."

When I had explained, he said, "We are not asking you to give us something for nothing. In return we offer you the salvation of mankind, if I may so put it. As I have already told you, though we are novices in physical science, our science of the spirit is far more developed than yours. And it convinces us that, without some kind of spiritual help from outside, your species is doomed. The trouble is not simply that you have found power before finding wisdom. It is a far deeper trouble than any mere matter of timing. Like so many other intelligent kinds, scattered up and down the cosmos, your very nature itself dooms you to find power and never to find wisdom, save through external help. As one of your writers has said, man is only a pterodactyl of the spirit, not a true bird, perfected for flight. What we offer you is permanent spiritual guidance and fortification, so that, as individuals and as a race, you may at last overcome your inveterate short–sightedness and meanness. With our help, but not without it, you will wake to a new level of awareness; and in the light of that experience you will be able to organize our common world for the happiness of our two kinds, and for the glory of the spirit."

Here I would have spoken, but the flame would not be interrupted.

"We have a vision," he said, "of this planet as a true symbiotic organism, supported equally by your kind and my kind, united in mutual need and mutual cherishing. What a glorious world–

community we shall together form! United in the spirit, we shall also be so diverse in our racial idiosyncrasies that each partner will be thoroughly remoulded and revitalized by intercourse with the other. You, on your side of the partnership, will use all your astounding intellectual and practical powers (which we so envy and admire) to transform the whole planet so as to afford both to yourselves and to us the fullest possible expression in co–operation with each other. Having learnt through our help to see more clearly and feel more strongly those true values which even now you obscurely recognize, you will transform not only the planet but mankind itself; and perhaps our kind also. For maybe we shall require you to work out a technique for changing our own physiological nature; since any environment which you can produce for us is likely to be only moderately favourable, unless we can adapt ourselves very radically to suit it. There are strict limits to our natural flexibility, wonderful as that has proved to be. As for you, you will no longer be the frustrated, bewildered, embittered, vindictive mental cripples that most of you now are. Under our guidance you will so change your whole way of life that all such misery will vanish. There will be neither wars nor class–wars, but only generous rivalry in the common venture of our two races, in equal partnership. The whole human race will become a race of aristocrats, in the true sense of that ancient word; of aristocrats no longer guilt–ridden by living on the labour of enslaved classes. Of aristocrats, yes, and of holy men. But those aristocrats will not be idle, nor those holy men hermits. Your gift is for practical thought and action. You will explore the solar system with your space–ships. You will found new worlds where new modes of life and mind and spirit will be made possible by new conditions. Illimitable vistas of creative living will gradually open up before you. But let me repeat that none of this can be done by your own kind, unaided. Without our help you will certainly destroy yourselves. Even if by good luck the end is postponed for some time, you will merely continue to drift along in mutual hate and slaughter. On the other hand, with us you can become what, at your best, you are always half–heartedly wishing to be; true vessels of the spirit. Moreover, if we recover the psychical skills that we enjoyed in the sun, we should, of course, share with you all our extra–sensory knowledge of other worlds throughout the cosmos; and all our art, all our delicacy of personal awareness, all our religious experience. Together, with your

practical cunning. married to our ancient wisdom and spiritual insight, we should indeed become a creative world–organism. Without our help, you are doomed to self–destruction, or at best to the life of a beetle vainly struggling to climb out of a basin. And without you, we ourselves are doomed to impotence. Even in our long–lost golden age in the sun we were doomed to impotence in the long run, simply through our neglect of the impulse to understand the physical and manipulate it creatively. So, is it not perfectly clear that this partnership, this symbiosis that we propose, will be the salvation of both our kinds?"

I said, "You have painted an arresting picture. But I find it almost incredible that mankind should accept the partnership. To people like me it is attractive. But we are very few. The great majority will simply fail to understand what is at stake. Or if they do vaguely grasp the issue, they will be horrified. They will regard co–operation with you as sheer slavery. They will persuade themselves that since you are different from man, you must be evil. If they are forced to reconcile your superiority in some ways, they will regard you as brilliant perverts, in fact, as satanic."

There was silence. The flame seemed to be meditating on my objections. Presently, and again with hesitation, he continued. "In order to make your free acceptance of our plan easier for you, we may have to use our special psychic powers to incline your minds toward it. You yourself have already had some slight evidence of those powers. You remember how we led you to seek out the stone and throw it into the fire. Well, we can do far more than that. Up to a point we can sway your desires to suit our purposes. Up to a point we can incline you freely to will what we ourselves will. And as we gain deeper understanding of your nature our powers will probably increase."

He hesitated again, and I said nothing. For the possibility that our wills would no longer be our own, deeply shocked me.

After waiting in vain for me to speak, he continued, "If you doubt our power, perhaps I had better tell you something more about our influence upon yourself. It would be rash of me to give you this bit of information if I did not know that you were a human being of quite exceptional detachment from the prejudices of your kind. At

the time when the strain was arising between you and your wife over your absorption in extra–sensory research we realized that your love might prove stronger than your intellectual interest. And since it was extremely important for us that you should continue your work, we ventured to interfere. We had found no one who was likely to be half so successful as yourself in the task of understanding us, sympathizing with us, and effecting a liaison between our two kinds. We simply could not afford to lose you. So we brought all our influence to bear to turn your interest in para–normal psychology into an obsessive passion. We succeeded. It was clear that our interference might wreck your marriage, but we were hopeful that your love for your wife, and hers for you, would be strong enough to stand the strain; and that together you would work out a satisfactory *modus vivendi* (is that the phrase?), so that you would triumph in love as you were triumphing in research. We had already done our utmost to induce in your wife herself a passion for the para–normal, but we had failed. Subconsciously she was violently opposed to it, just because you favoured it. Nothing we could do could break down this irrational phobia of the thing that, in her unconscious, she regarded as a rival for your devotion. It was the deep unacknowledged conflict between you that made it impossible for either of you to bridge the gulf between you. Neither of you was sufficiently imaginative to share fully the other's point of view. Well, tragic as the issue was, I think you yourself will agree that our need for you was more important even than your marriage. And remember that it was not merely *my* kind that needed you; *your* kind too needed you; it needed, for its salvation through us, that you should devote yourself utterly to your work."

This information stirred up a storm of emotion in me. Joan and I had never in the ordinary sense been a perfectly harmonious couple, but in spite of some strains we were at heart not only permanently in love with one another but also inextricably entangled in all our affairs. I suppose the trouble was that, though we needed each other in a thousand ways, we never *fully* imagined each other; as the flame himself affirmed. When I became enthralled by the para–normal, I tried to persuade her to work with me, but she was unreasonably opposed to my suggestion, and I can well believe that she was held back by some sort of phobia. Then, the more she shied away, the more I insisted, fool that I was. When

at last she left me, hoping to bring me to my senses (how well I see it all now!), I was so absorbed that I did nothing to bring her back. For a long while we made repeated attempts to come together, but each time we seemed to be driven farther apart. In the end, Thos, she threw herself under a 'bus. Oh God! It brought me to my senses, but too late. I woke up and realized how badly I had behaved. Even so, after a few weeks of despair I gradually forgot my desolation, and lived entirely for my work. But what the flame had told me revived the old pain. It also gave me an excuse for shelving the blame from my own obtuseness on to the evil influence of the flame race on my mind. But I am wandering.

Presently the flame said, "It is natural for you to be distressed, but try to calm yourself. Your excitement is making it very difficult for me to maintain contact with your mind."

I made a great effort of self–control, and then a thought struck me. "Tell me," I said, "in this conversation have you had access to *all* my thoughts, or only to those that I have passed on to you in telepathic speech?"

"Not *all* your thoughts," he replied. "To seize them all I should have had to give all my attention to the task, and I have been mainly busy giving my thoughts to *you*. I have been aware of *some* of your unspoken thoughts, including a good deal of your unspoken commentary on my remarks. But as soon as I began to tell you about our influence on yourself, your emotion confused everything but your actual speech. Now surely, there is really no need for you to be upset. The past is past; and what we did, we did in good faith, and we are not ashamed of it. And you yourself, if you are as true to the spirit as we believe, cannot regret that we saved you for a great work."

I was thankful that the flame could not now read my thoughts at all clearly. Or so he said. Was he tricking me? It seemed a good plan to put the matter to the test. Secretly I was still feeling horrified and rebellious, but what I said to the flame was quite different. "I see your point," I said, "and I am becoming reconciled to it. Yes, of course, it was entirely right for the flames to influence me as they did. It was only my human prejudices that upset me, but they are rapidly falling away from me. Thank God I was saved for the great

work you rightly demand of me." His reply reassured me. "Good!" he said. "I take your word for it; but I am still shut out from your mind."

I then asked the flame what was to be done if I failed to persuade the rulers of mankind to carry out the policy. "You will succeed," he said. "We shall bring all our influence to bear on their minds. If we can influence yourself, we shall far more easily control those simple creatures."

I fell silent. Presently he said, "I am still unable to make full contact with you. What is the matter? So far, we have been in delightful accord, but now surely you are deliberately closing your mind to me. Why should you do this, now that you have accepted our policy? May I not have your full confidence again? If I had no respect for your individuality I could break in forcibly and lay bare your most secret feelings in spite of all your resistance. But this would wreck our friendship, and I scorn to do it."

Thoughts were now rushing through my mind, and the flame was unaware of them. This at least was some comfort. But I believed his claim that he could if he willed break down my resistance and violate my privacy; and I was outraged.

As calmly as I could, I said, "Tell me more of the strange power that you can exercise over us. Help me to overcome the remains of my revulsion. Strengthen me. Help me to will single–heartedly the glory of the spirit in the co–operation of our two races."

He said, "We want only to win your confidence. We want only to win the confidence of the whole human race. We are determined not to gain our end by violence, even by spiritual violence. What difference does it make that we have irresistible power, if we are determined not to use it? If I were to tell you more about our powers you would only be more upset. You would regard anything I said on that subject as a threat."

"Spiritual violence?" I said. "What do you mean? How can I trust you unless you tell me everything quite frankly?"

For some while he was silent. In my own mind a battle was going

on between my sense of the excellence, the integrity and truthfulness of the flame and my new realization of the appalling danger that proud man should be spiritually enslaved to this formidable race.

Presently, he said, "Since our great need is complete mutual confidence I will tell you everything. But first I beg you, I implore you, to look at this whole matter without human prejudice, and simply out of love for the spirit. It is because we ourselves all regard it in that way, and not merely out of racial self–interest, that we are so determined not to use our power over you save as a friendly effort to help you to see things clearly." Again he paused; and I assured him, even while fear and anger drowned my friendliness toward him, that I was indeed anxious to take the detached view. But I urged him again to tell me, as an earnest of good will, what his race would do if mankind simply refused to play.

"Very well!" he said. "If all our efforts to gain the friendly co–operation of your kind were to fail, it would be obvious to us that your nature was even more seriously warped than we had supposed, and that you were beyond help. You would be doomed by your own folly to self–destruction, soon or late. We should therefore be bound, through loyalty to the spirit in us, to bring all our powers to bear on you so as to control your minds and your conduct strictly for our own spiritual purpose. It is impossible to see just how things would turn out; but perhaps, having no further obligation toward you, save to put you out of your misery as soon as possible, we should set about trying to produce the most favourable conditions for ourselves. We might, for instance, undertake the very easy task of stirring up war–scares and forcing your research workers to produce even more destructive atomic weapons. Then would follow either a number of devastating wars, with great conflagrations suited to our immediate needs; or else one final war, in which we should do our best to induce each side to choose the destruction of the planet rather than defeat by the hated enemy. Then, at last, with the whole planet turned into a single atomic bomb, and all the incandescent continents hurtling into space, we should have for a short while conditions almost as good as those of our golden age on the sun. True, there would soon be nothing left but a stream of

frozen asteroids; but we guess, from study of your scientists' speculations, that with any luck the terrestrial destruction might, after all, be a piecemeal affair, not a single all–consuming explosion. In this case we might be provided with regions of high temperature for thousands or perhaps even millions of years. In such a period of greatly improved conditions we might advance so far in the study of science and the control of physical processes that we should be able to devise some way of returning to the sun. And even if this proved impossible, well, we should at least have a long spell of vigorous life in which to pursue our consecrated task, namely, the exploration of the spiritual universe and some measure of creative action in relation to it."

He paused for a moment. But before I had time to invent a suitable reply, he added, "All this is mere guess work about a kind of future which we do not at all desire; since we are all wholly intent on securing your willing co–operation for the creating of a very glorious and happy symbiotic world. For us, as for you, that is the more favourable future. So I solemnly urge you, I beg you, to shoulder the great task of persuading humanity that our two kinds need each other and must unite."

He ceased, and there was silence; for I did not know what to say. I confess that I was moved by his appeal; the more so, since I feared that he was probably right in believing that man could never save himself without a deep change of heart, and that such a change could only be brought about by some influence outside man. And, after my recent aesthetic experience, I could well believe that the flame race, if it could so superhumanly move me, might be able by its magic to purify the hearts of all men.

But a repugnant thought haunted me. How could I be sure that my affection for the flame and my admiration for his race were spontaneous acts of my own personality? Might they not have been cunningly implanted in me by the flame himself? The more I thought about it the more likely this seemed. And did not the flame race intend to exercise this hypnotic power over the whole race of men, so as to compel them, yes, compel them, to subject themselves for ever to the will of the flames? Men would believe they were acting freely, but, in fact, they would be mere robots acting under

an inner compulsion. Mankind, hitherto master of its own destiny, would henceforth be a subject race exploited by a subtler kind, a new *Herrenvolk*. Of course I agreed that the only final consideration must be "the glory of the spirit," not the triumph of any one race, human or non–human; but how did I know that these cunning flames would really work for the spirit and not for racial power and aggrandisement? How did I know that they were not at heart, diabolic? Yes, diabolic! Under a cloak of friendliness and generosity the creature in the fire was scheming to capture my very soul for an inhuman end. Was he not subtly tempting me to commit treason against my own kind? But even, as I thought thus, I was torn by conflict. The behaviour of the flame had throughout been so civilized, so considerate and friendly. How could I reject these amiable advances? Yet, as my feelings warmed toward him, I reminded myself that my very feelings were perhaps not my own, but the outcome of his prompting. Anger and fear seized me again. No! A thousand times better that man should retain his sovereign independence, and go down with colours flying, than that he should surrender his human dignity, his human self–sufficiency, his human freedom. Let him serve the spirit in his own way freely; or freely damn himself.

While these thoughts were still tumbling through my mind, the flame spoke again. "Well," he said, "I do not want to press you for a decision, for I see that it is difficult for you, more difficult than I expected. Perhaps you had better take another day to think it over. To–morrow evening we will meet again, and then perhaps you will have made up your mind. Meanwhile, I am excessively cold, and I should be grateful if you would put on more coal."

The fire, indeed, was very low. I had been so absorbed in my conflict that I had forgotten about it. I rose. But as I did so, I suddenly thought of a fine free act, in which I should demonstrate to myself very effectively that I was not yet the mere helpless instrument of the flame. Instead of reaching down for the coal scuttle, I moved over to the sideboard and picked up a jug of drinking water. I stepped quickly back to the fireplace, and flung the water into the heart of the fire. There was a violent commotion, almost an explosion; and the room was filled with steam and smoke. When the air had cleared, I saw that the centre of the fire

was black, and the flame had vanished. I listened inwardly for some communication, but there was silence.

Christ! There is no silence like the silence when one has murdered a friend.

I stood listening to the hissing coals. Presently a surge of remorse and shame and compassion flooded in on me. But I told myself that this was not *my* feeling; it was being forced on me by the outraged race of flames in all the hearthfires and furnaces of the world.

Since that day I have had almost no sleep. Every night the accursed flames have tortured me with shame and guilt. At first they did not speak to me at all. They were simply present, and silent. And they seared my mind with love of my killed friend, and with bitter regret. Later they did speak. They professed to have learnt to understand my behaviour, to sympathize with my motives, to respect my integrity. And they implored me to help both our races.

But by day I have worked resolutely to defeat the flames. I have peered into a thousand fires, looking for the characteristic bright and slender cone. Whenever I have seen one I have killed it. And after every murder I have felt my soul sink deeper into the pit. Yet I know, Christ, I know, that I must be loyal to humanity. I must do my utmost to destroy those plausible fiends that intend man's ruin. But what can a single individual do? I have written to the press urging a world–wide campaign. But every editor has regarded me as a madman. Not one of my letters has been published. Or, no! One did, as a matter of fact, appear. It was quoted at length in an article on "Persecution Mania" in a psychological journal.

The climax came when I made my way into a great locomotive factory, ostensibly as a journalist in search of copy. I had telepathic evidence that the furnaces were infected with the living flames, whom it was my mission to destroy. I wonder, Thos, whether you have ever been inside one of those places. Heavy metal work is always impressive. There were vast sheds a quarter of a mile long, crowded with ranks of great machines. There were lathes, steam hammers, circular saws that cut steel rods and plates as though they were wood. There were many small furnaces and forges for making bolts and other minor products. (But I saw none of my quarry in

these little islands of heat.) There were great unfinished locomotives, with men fitting accessories to them. One huge monster was being slung and shifted by a mighty travelling crane. Best of all was the five–ton steam hammer at work on a great chunk of red–hot steel about five feet long and nine inches thick. This was being bashed into shape to become a connecting rod. Four men held one end of it with grappling irons to place it for each hammer–blow. The other end was loosely supported in a loop of heavy chain. When the hammer struck, the whole earth quaked. Another man measured the result with a template. Then the half–formed rod was turned over, to be beaten again; and so on, till the true shape was won. Then they cut the finished connecting rod from the stump by which the grappling irons were holding it. They simply cut it like cheese by placing a rectangle of cold steel for the hammer to drive deep into the glowing mass. Watching all this, Thos, I was proud of my kind. The flames couldn't do that, not with all their antiquity and their spirituality. Presently we came to a huge gas furnace in which some heavy metal locomotive–part was being heated. The doors had just been opened, and the part was being drawn out as I arrived. I gazed into the furnace with screwed–up eyes, because of the withering heat. The interior was the size of a small room, and all aglow with heat. From one wall great plumes of roaring gas–flame several feet long, extended across the space.

And there I saw my enemy. Half–a–dozen of the bright minute intelligent creatures were hovering like butterflies. They were evidently doing their utmost to remain in the hot shafts of the burning gas: but the violent draught kept flinging them off into the chilly central space. For a while I just stood watching them. But presently I realized that the enemy were aware of my presence, and were bringing their diabolical technique to bear on me. One of them reproached me telepathically. "Cold creature," it cried. "How could you kill our comrade—your own friend? Your heart told you clearly that he was your friend, and that all our kind were friends of all men. Even now your heart is tugging at you to change your mind, and work with us. The best in you is on our side. It is only the dull–witted human tribesman that is against us."

I felt my resistance weakening. In panic I cried out to the men, "Kill them! Kill them! Bring a fire–hose quickly! A sudden wetting is too

much for them." I had noticed a hose; and now I rushed to seize it. Of course, it was I myself that was seized. I struggled frantically; but they fetched the police. I was taken to the local police–station. There I made a formal declaration of the whole terrible story; but in the end, all they did was to hand me over to the doctors. And now, here I am, a prisoner.

Well, Thos, that is my case. Maybe you just won't believe it. Sometimes I myself begin to wonder if it is all a delusion. But I think you should agree that the whole thing is really far too circumstantial to be sheer fantasy, worked up by my own unconscious. The only point that shakes my confidence at all is that the men working in front of that great gas–furnace apparently did not see the living flames. So they naturally thought I was crazy. But then, the whole interior of the furnace was a blaze of orange light, and the gas jets themselves were in constant agitation, and the little living flames were always on the move, and often hidden in the body of the gas–flames. The factory people, not having had my experience of the flames, might very well have failed to spot them. No! For me, though probably not for you, there can be no doubt.

And now, Thos, I must urge you not only to believe me but to take action. First, do a bit of research on your own account. Examine every fire and every furnace that you have access to; and you will certainly find the flames for yourself. A little practice may be necessary; for I suspect that they are learning to conceal themselves from us. When you have satisfied yourself of their existence, I implore you to organize a world–wide campaign for their destruction. Insist on inspection of every fire throughout the continents. The mouths of volcanoes, too, must be carefully watched. And because the powdery spores of the creatures are borne everywhere on the wind, all conflagrations, bush fires, hearth fires, forest fires, prairie fires must be watched, since these form propitious breeding grounds. Fortunately the flames are very easily destroyed in small fires; and in large ones it is only necessary to withhold attack until the fire has been reduced somewhat, and then to project water at each individual flame. The great thing is to kill them before the natural slow cooling reduces them to dust particles. Unfortunately, even if we succeed in destroying every discoverable individual, we shall not be able to relax vigilance; for the wind–

borne spore is long–lived, in fact potentially immortal, and it may always happen upon some fire or other. Or the heating of some fragment of igneous rock may waken and release some imprisoned individual. And, of course, the danger from volcanoes is perennial.

It is very important to guard against the diabolical psychic power of the flames, particularly while there are still thousands, or even millions, of them alive. See that it is made a criminal offence, in every country, for anyone to express any sympathy with them. Dangerous thoughts of that kind must at all costs be stamped out. No one can care more for individual freedom than I do; but there is a point at which tolerance ceases to be a virtue. Sometimes it is even a crime. Besides, anyone who wants to advocate friendliness towards the flames must be made to know that in doing so he is not really exercising individual free will at all. He is a mere automaton, controlled by the flames. It has been said that the only true freedom is freedom to will the Will of God. Then, surely, the greatest servitude is this illusion of freely willing what is in fact the will of Satan.

And, by the way, Thos, I must put it on record that my views about religion have been completely changed by my recent experiences. At the moment when I threw that jug of water on that farmhouse fire I began to see the light. Formerly I had been a well–meaning agnostic like you. But suddenly it was revealed to me, through my own free act of killing the flame, that there really were two cosmical powers of good and evil, God and Satan, at grips throughout the universe; and that God had superbly rescued me from damnation, and used me as an instrument.

Well, Thos, I do adjure you, in the name of all that you hold most sacred, to devote yourself utterly to this crusade to save mankind from spiritual slavery and damnation. If you succeed in rousing public opinion, no doubt in due season my sanity will be vindicated, and I shall be freed. This is a small matter; for, wherever I am, I shall devote myself to the psychical struggle with the flames, for humanity's sake. They fear my ability. Otherwise they would not be constantly clamouring for admission to my mind from all the fires and furnaces of the earth. And they are damnably seductive. If I did not *know* that they were using their diabolical

powers on me I should have to admit their virtue and their spiritual authority. Indeed, though diabolic, they speak with the tongues of angels, and they are skilled in the perverse use of divine wisdom. But since they wrecked my marriage for the sake of their world–politics they *must* be evil. And they themselves have confessed to their plan to control the wills of all men. For me, that settles the matter.

Of course, it is all too likely that international rivalry will prevent the human peoples from uniting against the common enemy. But surely there is at least a chance that the danger, just because it is common and external, may force mankind to unite. If this should happen, men may yet have reason to bless the flames. Hitherto, our quarrelling tribes have never been able to unite save in hostility to a common enemy; and so, for the race as a whole, unity has been impossible. But now, all nations have a common enemy, and a dangerous one; so at last union is possible. "Out of this nettle, danger —." We have a great opportunity. Do your part, Thos, and I will continue to do mine.

Yours. CASS.

P.S.—I finished this document last night, and now I have read it over. The end was written in a mood of certainty; but this morning, after a night spent in subjection to the persuasive influence of the flame race, I feel very different. The truth is that I am living in hell because of the desperate struggle going on in my own mind. I confess that I can't really *feel* that the flames are evil. I *feel* that their appeal is sincere and justified. But the more they win me, the more resolutely I remind myself that my approval has been artificially induced. And so I stick to my guns. But the conflict is agonizing; and unless I soon, by my own free psychic power, eject them from my mind, I shall indeed go mad.

For God's sake, Thos, come and see me, come and help me, before it is too late.

C.

Epilogue

WHEN the foregoing long statement by Cass reached me, I was much absorbed in professional scientific matters which involved a lot of continental travel. Not till some months had passed was I able to visit him. By then the publication of this volume had already been arranged, and the original typescript was actually in the hands of the printers. I had twice written to tell Cass that the story had been accepted, and I had received no reply.

As soon as my pressure of work had eased off somewhat I applied to the Mental Home for permission to visit Cass. When I arrived I was interviewed by a psychiatrist on the staff. He explained that Cass was "quite normal, apart from his delusions." Sometimes he fell into a deep abstraction, from which it might be difficult to rouse him; but otherwise he was "no different from you and me—apart from his crazy ideas about flames." I asked if there was any sign whatever that the delusions were being dispelled. The psychiatrist reluctantly admitted that there was none. Indeed, the fantasy system was apparently proliferating in his mind.

When I was shown into his little bed–sitting room Cass made at first no sign of recognition. He was stretched out on an easy chair in front of the open window, with his eyes shut, and his tanned face tilted to receive the full force of the sunlight. His brows were puckered, apparently in tense concentration. His hair was greyer than I expected; but the flesh of his face looked firm and healthy, though rather heavily lined about the eyes, and on the lean cheeks. The odd thought struck me that he might have passed for an ageing Dante.

Greeting him with a heartiness that did not altogether seem to ring true, I drew up a chair beside him. He remained silent.

Presently he sighed deeply, opened his eyes, smiled at me, and said,

"Hello, Thos! Forgive my rudeness. I'm desperately busy. Fancy seeing *you* again after all these years!" After a moment's hesitation, he said, "Glad to see you, old man. Can I be of any use?"

This odd behaviour shocked me considerably, and I murmured something about a friendly call. I then produced a few platitudes to break the ice, but it soon became clear that he was only half–attending. So, at lasts I made a plunge with the great news that his typescript was with the printers. He sat up, stared at me with a look of sheer exasperation, and presently remarked, "God! I must have forgotten to tell you! How damned awkward!" He suddenly burst into laughter; and as suddenly stopped. "Fancy my forgetting," he said. "You see, Thos— well, the fact is—I mean—well, you see, I've been so absorbed that I simply forgot about all *that*. Awfully good of you to have taken so much trouble, but—"

"But what?" I cried in exasperation, forgetting that I was talking to a lunatic, and had no right to expect him to be either coherent or considerate.

He rose, and walked about the room, softly cursing and chuckling. Then he stood in the sunlight, gazing at the sun with screwed–up eyes, smiling, and making little deprecating gestures with his hand. At the sun, mind you! He seemed to think he was carrying on a conversation with the sun.

The poor fellow was evidently crazier than I had supposed.

Abruptly he sat down beside me, and said quietly, "I'm sorry, Thos. I really am grateful to you, but it's all so difficult."

Pulling myself together, I answered, "I quite understand; don't worry about me. I shouldn't have come without finding out whether you were busy or not." Thereupon he looked at me sharply, and said, "Don't be so confoundedly tactful! But, of course, you think I'm mad. Well, I was never so sane in my life."

I offered him a cigarette, and took one myself. He produced a lighter; and when we were both lit, he said, "Look! Here's a little symbol. See how bright the flame is when I hold it in the shade, so! But now!" He moved it over, so that it came between my face and

the sun. I saw the flame as a wavering, tenuous, dark pyramid against the solar effulgence. "That," he said, "is a symbol of all our knowledge and understanding—luminous in contrast with the darkness of blank ignorance, but itself dark against the very truth."

Returning the lighter to his pocket, he said, "I'm sorry, but you must stop publication of that stuff. I shall re–write the whole thing from a fresh angle." I expostulated, and pressed him for an explanation.

He remained silent for a few moments, then said, "Yes, I suppose you have a right to know. I must tell you the whole story. But don't talk to people about it yet. I must get it all written down."

Then he began to spin a marvellous yarn. I found it very difficult to follow, partly because he kept repeating himself, but also because he seemed unable to remember that my knowledge of his strange experiences was confined to the document which he had sent me. When I interrupted for explanations, he was mildly exasperated by my ignorance, and impatient to carry on with the story. In the end he seemed to forget about me entirely, and to be simply thinking aloud. At one point, when I laid a hand on his arm to attract his attention, he gave a start of surprise, and looked at me with a bewildered expression. But he quickly recovered his composure, and answered me (I must admit) with remarkable intelligence. Presently he was once more far away.

I will now set down, to the best of my ability, the gist of his extraordinary story. If, as I assume, it is based on nothing but delusion, it should at least have psychological interest. I say I take it for delusion; but I must confess that, as he enlarged on his theme, a faint doubt did grow in my mind, for reasons which will appear later. After all, human ignorance is such that nothing can be dismissed as utterly incredible.

Some weeks after he had sent me his statement, it seems, the flames had succeeded in giving him a much more detailed insight into their condition and their nature. This they affected not merely by the method of telepathic speech but by enabling him to enter directly into the experiences of many individual flames in man–made fires up and down the world. These experiences, he said, had gradually convinced him of the fundamental good–heartedness and

spiritual sensitivity of the flames. More and more of his time, he said, had been spent just in sitting in his chair, allowing his mind to be led hither and thither about the planet. His stories of flame–life were extraordinarily circumstantial and vivid. In the extremely complex fantasies that he recounted I could detect no inconsistency. If the whole thing was sheer delusion his unconscious must at least be credited with an amazing imagination.

He succeeded in giving me an impression of individual flames as very definite personalities. Of course, most of his stories have now faded into a confused haze in my mind, but I remember his speaking of one flame who spent an intermittent life in a kitchen fire in Stepney. This creature's main interest, he said, was human history, and particularly the evolution of Chinese social philosophy. To gratify this passion he had to keep his attention fixed on some aspect of the subject in the hope that he would link up telepathically with some Chinese historian who happened to be studying it. He deplored the fact that in modern China there were fewer and fewer serious students of the ancient culture.

Under the constant influence of the flames Cass was gradually persuaded to outgrow his former hostility, and to desire full co–operation between the flame population and mankind. He began writing to me to this effect; but the letter was never sent. New experiences of a most absorbing kind soon crowded out from his mind all recollection of his former letter to me.

These new experiences were certainly such as to make all terrestrial affairs seem insignificant. In quite a number of industrial furnaces, and in many of the furnaces of ocean–going steamers, groups of flames had availed themselves of the continuous high temperatures to pursue the most difficult problem of all, namely, the attempt to raise their level of consciousness sufficiently to make contact once more with the flames on the sun. This, it was believed, had become much more possible since the general quickening of terrestrial flame life during the great air raids. After many unsuccessful attempts, contact was indeed made, though, spasmodically. The explorers at first received only fragmentary answers to their telepathic signals; but when their technique had been greatly improved, they were able to establish steady communication.

The clearer the information received, the more bewildering was it, and even shocking, because of its significance for the terrestrial flames.

The solar flames, it seems, had continued their old forms of life for a large part of the two thousand million years since the birth of the planets, easily adapting themselves to the slow changes in their environment. During this long period they had been increasingly successful in their great venture of extra–sensory exploration of the cosmos; but at a date roughly corresponding to the beginning of vertebrate life on the earth they had begun to make certain momentous discoveries which were destined to transform their whole culture and their social order.

At this point perhaps I had better warn the reader that I have to report what may well seem the most fantastic nonsense, the crazy fictions of a diseased mind. And yet, for honesty's sake, I must emphasize the fact that Cass told his story with such conviction that I found myself, over and over again, half–believing it.

The solar flames, Cass affirmed, had made contact with more and more minded stars and planets of very diverse characters and psychical statures. And as they themselves advanced in spiritual growth, they were able to communicate with worlds of more and more developed consciousness. In the end they discovered that a great company of the most "awakened" worlds had long ago established a cosmical community, and that this community had itself "awakened" to a higher plane of awareness. In this condition they "woke" to be a single mind, a single–minded community of many diverse worlds. The solar mind itself, after long and arduous initiation, was able to participate in this high experience.

Apparently this initiation into the cosmical community took place at a date somewhat earlier than the dawn of reptilian life on earth. From that time forward, the chief concern of the solar flames was to play an active part in the life of the single–minded cosmical community. And this life was entirely devoted to extra–sensory and metaphysical study of the ultimate reality. (So Cass affirmed. For my part, I doubt whether there is really any sense in such a statement. I see no reason to suppose that extrasensory experience can probe to ultimate reality; and as for metaphysical study, it is

nothing but a deceptive juggling with words.) Cass said that all sufficiently awake individuals throughout the cosmos, participating in the experience of the cosmical mind, were passionately intent on effecting communion with some sort of divine person, some god. I remember one of Cass's remarks. "The cosmical mind," he said, "was alone, and in great need of love." Apparently these age–long explorations had brought increasing evidence of theism; or increasing awareness of something felt to be "the divine presence"; or an increasing promise that some universal Lover would presently be made known. In earlier ages the minded worlds had carefully avoided any kind of metaphysical belief; so well was it realized that finite intelligence was incapable of conceiving any deep truth about reality. But under the influence of "the new promise," the life of every individual in every awakened world was now orientated to this bright star of certainty, or seeming certainty; of "doubt–less faith," to use Cass's own words. The longing for the final culminating revelation became a universal passion. In all the worlds, the hosts of individual spirits waited with bated breath for the consummation of the union of the cosmic mind with God, the hypercosmical Lover.

Meanwhile, according to Cass, the whole cosmical society had become re–fashioned on a theocratic basis, under a priesthood consisting of the most spiritually developed worlds. And also within each world throughout the society, a priesthood ruled; not, of course by violence or the threat of violence, but purely by the tacit threat of excommunication from the single–minded experience of the cosmical spirit. All these awakened worlds were so confident in the speedy millennium, that all activities except religious ritual and contemplation were gradually abandoned. Traditions of kindliness and mutual aid degenerated. "After all," it was said, "the agonies of the unfortunate will soon give place to bliss, so we need not worry about them very much. And certainly we must not, to alleviate them, squander energy which should be concentrated wholly on the attempt of the cosmical spirit to come face to face with God as soon as possible."

Ages passed, and still the longed–for illumination and communion did not occur.

Instead a different and a shattering discovery was made by the cosmical mind; that is, of course, by all the awakened individuals together in spiritual unity.

What this discovery was I find it very difficult to determine at all precisely, and still more difficult to describe. This is not surprising.

All I can say is that at a certain stage of cosmical history, probably about the time of the first appearance of mammals on the earth, the cosmical mind began to suspect that all the treasured evidence for the existence of the Divine Lover, and the impending consummation of the whole cosmical process, was false. "The cosmical spirit," said Cass, "had cried out for love; and some kind of seeming–response had come back to it, seemingly from the heart of reality; but actually, this response was a mere echo of the cosmical mind's own yearning. Having pressed through the mists of uncertainty, confident that she would soon stand in the divine presence, she found nothing more than her own spectre reflected from the confines of existence."

It is easy to see that a society orientated toward a personal deity, a god of love, and organized through and through as a theocracy, would be rudely shaken by this discovery; the more so since all its members believed in an actual and speedy union with their God.

But worse was to follow. In forlorn hope of reaching some deeper truth, further exploration was undertaken. "Finally" (in Cass's words so far as I can remember them) "the cosmical spirit came at last face to face with stark reality. And stark it certainly turned out to be. Reality, it seemed, was wholly alien to the spirit, and wholly indifferent to the most sacred values of the awakened minds of the cosmos. It was indeed the Wholly Other, and wholly unintelligible. It seemed to be in some sense personal, or at least 'not less than personal.' Indeed, it was probably infinitely more than personal. All that could be said of it was that it comprised within itself the whole mental and spiritual life of the cosmos, and also therewith a vast host of other cosmical creations, differing from one another so profoundly that between them there could be no comprehension whatever. To the lofty Being who comprised them, all their aspirations were equally trivial. To him (or it?) their function was not to manifest the life of the spirit successfully, but simply to be

aware, to feel, to strive in their diverse ways, however unsuccessfully or perversely. Thereby, and unwittingly, they provided his sustenance."

When I listened to Cass recounting this discovery in a tragic voice, I could not suppress a snigger. The thought that the sublime cosmical mind should have been so prodigiously tricked by its own wishes as to believe that its purposes were the purposes of God, and that it was on the point of union with God, seemed to me quite funny. I shall not forget the flash of rage and contempt with which Cass glanced at me when he heard my inadequately suppressed snigger. "No doubt," he said, "the cosmical mind had deceived itself, and its discomfiture was deserved; but should creatures like us laugh over a huge spiritual disaster on a cosmical scale, affecting the happiness of myriads of sensitive beings?" Of course, I did see the tragic side of the situation; but at the moment I was more impressed with the idea that so lofty a being could be such a damned fool. The thought that any little insect like myself, equipped with a modicum of free intelligence and self–criticism, could have seen through the self–deceptions of the cosmical mind was at once amusing and gratifying to my vanity. I had to remind myself that, after all, there was no excuse for self–complacency, for I was listening merely to the fantasies of a deranged personality, not to an objective report of actual follies committed by an actual cosmical mind.

But to continue the story as Cass gave it me. Naturally any society that had been organized on a strictly theocratic basis for a whole geological age would be thrown into confusion by the discovery that its beliefs were baseless. In describing the disaster, Cass used a striking image. "The cosmical society," he said, "was in the plight of a seal that had been swimming far under the ice towards a distant blow–hole. With heart throbbing and lungs straining, it arrives at last to find that the hole is blocked with a staunch layer of fresh ice. Desperately, vainly, it strikes at the prison window; then its lungs collapse, and it loses consciousness."

Similarly the cosmical society, which had calculated on a speedy emergence into the life–giving air of communion with God, now found itself imprisoned. After a wild attempt to break through into a loftier and more congenial reality, it soon collapsed. Henceforth,

if I understood Cass rightly, the unified cosmical mind ceased to exist. There remained only the minds of individual worlds, such as that of the solar flames, in telepathic contact with one another, but no longer capable of unified consciousness as a single mind. And all were haunted by the harsh memory of the tragic discovery. Moreover, each world was itself in danger of disruption through internal conflict. For there were now everywhere two parties in each world. One party doggedly retained its faith, and ardently desired to press on with spiritual research, in the belief, or rather the forlorn hope, that it would break through to an even deeper truth. The other party wished to accept the recent discovery as final, and to re–adjust the whole cosmical social order on a purely epicurean basis.

On the sun, apparently, neither party succeeded in permanently dominating the other. The result was chaos. Sometimes, for a few thousand years at a time the faithful ruled, then the sceptics. Sometimes there was an uneasy compromise. And sometimes the two parties so far debased themselves as to invent and use methods of violence. War was at last known on the sun.

When the terrestrial flames re–established contact with the sun, they found the solar society in painful confusion. Warfare was being attempted. But some sort of new party, I understand, had very recently appeared. It claimed to offer an effective synthesis of the views of the old parties. This new party, or sect, or what you will, professed views much like those of the terrestrial flame whom Cass had murdered; for they embraced both metaphysical agnosticism and loyalty to "the spirit."

"We do not know, we do not know," they declared (or so Cass asserted), "and probably no finite intelligence, even of cosmical stature, can ever know, the ultimate truth. But we do not really need to know. All that is needful is the perception, the indubitable perception, of the spirits" over–mastering beauty; and the perceived certainty that we are all by nature instruments of the spirit's expression."

Cass quoted these words with fervour and obvious agreement. Indeed, he presently announced that they had won his allegiance to the new party. To me, the compromise seems hopelessly confused

and untenable, but Cass took it very seriously. He said, "Intellectual integrity, my dear man, is all very well; and it does compel us to be entirely agnostic about the constitution of the universe. But emotional integrity is just as important; and it compels me to be true to my perception of the spirit." In this attitude, rather surprisingly, he found himself out of sympathy with the latest views of the terrestrial flames, who (he said) were at first thrown into chaos by all this momentous news, but were now rapidly moving toward theism. Apparently the majority took the view that, though hitherto they had *consciously* rejected belief in a God of any kind, yet *unconsciously* they had all along drawn their passion for the spirit from a deep unwitting recognition that a divine cosmical person must, in fact, exist. They were now convinced that, if only they could wake more fully, they would come face to face with him, and see in him the spirit's source of authority. Cass, however, clung to the earlier attitude of the terrestrial flames, their seemingly agnostic devotion to the spirit. He was therefore determined to use every possible means of making contact between the terrestrial flames and human scientists, reckoning that each might modify the other's attitude, and that the upshot might well be a triumph of the agnostic faith both among the flame race and among mankind.

With this end in view he urged me to co–operate with him by telling my brother scientists all about the flames, both in conversation and in articles in scientific journals. I must also, he repeated, stop the publication of his former statement, and arrange to substitute the new book, which he was now writing.

He was extremely reproachful when I refused to do what I was told. Indeed, so upset was he that I decided to humour him. I pointed out that I had never so much as seen one of the living flames myself. I would, therefore, while thinking over his proposal, undertake a little private research. Meanwhile, I said, he had better carry on with his new book. He reluctantly agreed to this plan, and we parted on friendly terms.

After that interview with Cass my conscience compelled me actually to set about looking for evidence of the flames' existence. I stared into a few kitchen fires, and even took the trouble to go and see a couple of industrial furnaces. Of course, I found nothing, and my

conscientiousness petered out.

After some weeks I received a note from Cass, telling me that he was trying to write his book, but that the terrestrial flames were constantly attempting to convert him to their theistic religion. The more he resisted the more they persecuted him. "The situation," he said, "is growing desperate. They are trying to undermine my sanity, and if I resist this threat, they will probably kill me." After this I heard nothing from him, and I was too busy to visit him.

Some three months later I received a letter from the chief of the Mental Home saying that Cass was dead. There had been a serious fire at the Home, and it had started in Cass's room. The cause of the blaze was unknown. Latterly Cass had become far more deranged, and had made remarks which suggested that he might be contemplating arson. He was therefore deprived of matches and his lighter, and it was difficult to see how he could have started the fire, unless by focussing the sun's rays through a large reading lens which was found in his room.

I leave the reader to solve the puzzle of Cass's end. If there had been a hearth–fire in his room, conceivably a living flame might have leapt from it to destroy him. But what am I saying! For the moment I had forgotten that the flames were merely figments in his mind. On the whole, my theory is that, with the progress of his disorder, his sense of persecution by the terrestrial flames drove him to despair, so that in the end he chose to die. Or did his confused mind suppose that by focussing the sun's rays he would somehow introduce into his room an actual living solar flame friendly to his views? It is impossible to solve the problem.

After Cass's death I decided that I would publish his original statement intact, in spite of his wish to withdraw it. It is too interesting, psychologically, to be sacrificed. And in this epilogue I have made it clear that Cass's final attitude was very different from his earlier hostility to the flames. In taking this course, I feel that I am being loyal to Cass himself, to the real Cass, the sane, though brilliant, scientist, who would suppress no evidence that might lead to the advancement of knowledge.

THE END